

## **Harry Potter and The Death Eater Menace**

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# Harry Potter and The Death Eater Menace

by [TheSinister\\_Man](#)

## Summary

Azkaban has been broken into and the supposed 'right hand' of the Dark Lord; Sirius Black is now at large. With the Wizarding World plunged into a frenzy of fear, Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry shall play host to the Dementors of Azkaban.

## Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

# Prelude (Theodore Nott)

## HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATH EATER MENACE

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### CHAPTER 1: Theodore Nott and the House of Seven Gargoyles

**19 June 1993 at 5:00 pm**

Nott Manor

Nottinghamshire, UK

A soft pop accompanied the arrival of Theo and his father at the family's ancestral manse. Lord Nott strode brusquely towards the manor house, but Theo paused and looked up towards the foreboding building. He had lived here continuously from the day he came home from St. Mungo's as a baby until the day he left for Hogwarts on September 1st of 1991, save for a few rare social functions. Indeed, had there not been an unusual number of children his age born into families politically allied with his own and with whom he was expected to hobnob, Theo might never have seen another child before getting on the Hogwarts Express. But he had been gone for almost two years, and Nott Hall seemed different. It was certainly as dreary as he'd remembered, but Theo now had the oddest feeling that it had ... *shrunk* somehow. Shrunk and become less imposing than it had been on the day he left for Hogwarts.

The *gargoyles*, however, were every bit as big and fearsome as he'd recalled. There were seven of the beastly things arranged at odd intervals around the house. Theo had seen gargoyles in books and knew what ordinary gargoyles looked like on Muggle structures. He'd actually been surprised to learn that they were usually mere functional ornaments – water spouts designed to funnel rain off of the roofs of medieval buildings and which had been decorated to look like deformed people or animals for aesthetic reasons. The gargoyles of Nott Manor, however, were statues with no functional purpose.

Well, no *obvious* functional purpose. Before she died, Theo's mother had warned the young child repeatedly never to play outside of the house without either her or Alex or one of the kinder house elves as chaperones or else "*the gargoyles might get you.*" After she'd died and he'd gotten older, Theo eventually decided that there was nothing dangerous about the stone statues and that his mother wished him to stay in the house at all times for some other disturbing reason most likely related to his father. But Theo had become a wizard since leaving Nott Hall albeit only a young one, and his studies both at Hogwarts and under the brief tutelage of Lucius Malfoy had taught him to reexamine his childish assumptions.

The gargoyles were all identical. Each was a short but stocky four-legged beast that looked vaguely like a cross between a lion and a small bull with thick barrel chests and crooked horns extending out of a rough mane. He studied them now with senses that he'd not possessed when he left for Hogwarts and which he had only begun to refine. And those senses told him now that his earlier childish fears had been correct. There was magic in the seven gargoyles. Magic and hunger and also an inexplicable yet terrible rage that was only restrained by their stony natures.

"Theodore!" Lord Nott called out over his shoulder. "Don't dawdle. We have much to talk about."

Theo's head snapped towards his father in surprise, but the man had already turned back around and headed on towards the house. He honestly couldn't remember the last time his father had used his actual first name. Usually, it was "brat" or "little bastard" if not something worse. Theo picked up his trunk and followed after the older man, now studiously avoiding the gaze of the seven gargoyles ... if not their attentions.

Once the two were inside, Tiberius called for a house elf. "Rogo! See to young Master Theodore's trunk. He and I have matters to discuss in my study. Send refreshment when you are done."

The hunchbacked house elf bowed deeply and then silently limped over to Theo's trunk. The boy recalled that Rogo had once accidentally spilled coffee on Lord Nott's trousers during breakfast about five or six years before. The next day Rogo had a limp that hadn't healed in all the years since, and he rarely spoke again except when ordered to. But he'd also gotten a lot more attentive when serving hot beverages, so Theo imagined that his father thought it a fair exchange. There was a soft pop and both Rogo and the trunk were gone.

"Come along now, son," said Nott almost pleasantly as he strode towards his private study. After a moment's hesitation, Theo followed. Soon, they were situated in the Lord's study next to a roaring fire. At first, Theo (who had never been in this room before in his entire life) wondered why his father would have a fire blazing in his study on a hot June day, but as he came nearer, he realized that the flames were cobalt blue and that they seemed to emit

coldness rather than heat. That explained why the room was cool, bordering on chilly. Or perhaps that last bit was the result of Theo's nerves. As he sat, Theo reinforced his Occlumency shields for perhaps the tenth time since first spotting his father at King's Cross Station. Though he felt confident that any Legilimens who casually reached into his mind would find only the dutiful thoughts of an obedient son, part of him still feared that he would never be able to fool his father with such lies.

Or that his father would think kindly of him even if he believed the lies were true.

"Shall we take tea, Theodore?" Tiberius asked with unnatural politeness. "It is, after all, the British Muggle's one indisputable contribution to proper society."

"Yes, please," Theo replied calmly. Tiberius said nothing else as he poured two cups for himself and his youngest boy. He did crook an eyebrow when Theo politely declined milk, sugar, and lemon all.

*"Well, Dad," Theo thought to himself. "I don't know how you drink it, so I have no way of knowing where the poison is, now do I?"*

Tiberius handed the cup over to his son, and the two drank in silence for a few moments until the older man spoke again. Relative silence, anyway – Lord Nott had a habit of slurping his tea.

"Now then, Theodore. It's been a long time since we've talked like this ... father-to-son. Tell me, how have things been at Hogwarts?"

"Oh, you know. The usual." Theo took a long sip of tea. "I was petrified by a basilisk, but I got better in no time. Other

than that, it's been rather boring. Just studying and tests."

"But still leaving time for physical activity, I see," Tiberius said, completely ignoring the shocking news about his son encountering a basilisk. "Why I think you've grown at least half a foot since last I saw you!"

*"Yeah, that happens to growing boys over the course of two years, Dad,"* Theo thought to himself while maintaining his outer shell of total placidity. "Our most recent DADA instructor, the one apparently responsible for all the petrifications, believed in physical fitness. Every weekday morning, most of the students had to rise at dawn for a regimen of exercise. Calisthenics. Running. Basic hand-to-hand combat. Even an obstacle course."

Tiberius nodded. "Your brother Alexander tells me that they have similar programs at Durmstrang. Personally, I've never seen the need for such nonsense. We are wizards. We have wands. Whatever sort of danger would we ever face that would call for Muggle brutishness in place of our magical birthright?"

*"Uh-huh. I wonder if that attitude has anything to do with how you've gained at least two stone since the last time I saw you. You never could resist a second helping of dessert."* Theo shrugged. "Lockhart wanted it. The Headmaster approved it. None of the students had any say in the matter. I suppose it could have been worse." He paused. "By the way, where is Alex? Shouldn't he be back from Durmstrang by now?"

"Alas, he was delayed by school business and took a later train. It seems your brother Alexander has been selected as one of the Durmstrang Sixth Year prefects and was required to stay behind for an orientation meeting. He is



expected to arrive early Sunday afternoon." Theo actually smiled at his brother's good fortune while Tiberius continued. "Now, let us move on to the rest of your ... Hogwarts experience. How are your grades? How have the teachers been treating you? Well, other than the one that caused you to be petrified, of course. Have you made any friends? Or enemies? Any Mudbloods or blood traitors causing you any problems?" Tiberius paused to slurp up some tea. "I hear tell that some uppity little Mudblood tramp is first in your class! I suppose she must be simply *awful*! In *my* day, we'd have dealt *properly* with trash like that."

Despite his best efforts to occlude, Theo put his cup back onto his saucer with just *a little* too much force, causing them to clank audibly. Most Muggles would not have even noticed the sound, but Purebloods of Ancient and Noble Houses are taught the social graces practically as soon as they finish teething, and Theo couldn't help but grimace at the faux pas he'd made. He looked up at his father.

"Her name is Hermione Granger. She's been first in our class two years running. And yes, she is generally believed to be ..." Theo paused for a fraction of a second to decide whether to use the word his father obviously wanted to hear. In his mind's eye, he saw Hermione's eyes and felt the warmth that was always in them and decided that his father could rot. "... a *Muggleborn*. However, there is some speculation that she is related to the Dagworth-Grangers, most likely through squibs."

"Really," Tiberius said almost languidly. "How interesting. I suppose that is why our dear friend Lucius Malfoy allowed her to tutor the children of his vassals, Crabbe and Goyle. Duncan and Gregory Sr. were both quite vexed about it and told me so repeatedly when they dined here."

Theo raised an eyebrow. "I wasn't aware that our House socialized with Lord Crabbe and Lord Goyle except when they were accompanying Lord Malfoy. If I remember correctly, you had previously described them as ... *beneath* us."

"Hmm. Yes. Yes, I did. Sour grapes, I suppose. You see, in retrospect, I think I was a bit jealous of the fact that Crabbe and Goyle were both vassals of our good friend Lucius Malfoy rather than myself. Even oafish buffoons can be of value if they can remember to vote which way you tell them to. Their five votes each added to my own bloc might well have moved the Wizengamot in a more ... convivial direction on a number of issues."

He took another loud slurp, causing Theo to wince slightly. "And speaking of our good friend Lucius Malfoy, how was the summer last which you spent with him? Did he treat you well?"

"Quite well, Father. He was a perfect host."

"I've no doubt. I'll wager he treated you as if you were his own."

Theo froze for just an instant. He knew his father had been toying with him since the moment he'd arrived at King's Cross, but there was definitely a hidden meaning in that last sentence that was lost on him. Slightly afraid that something important had just slipped past, he elected to say nothing in response, and after a brief silence, Tiberius shrugged his shoulders and moved on.

"But in any case, I now see that jealousy is a futile and unnecessary emotion. Even more so now in light of recent developments. Do you get along with the Crabbe and Goyle heirs?"

Theo nodded. "I've had no difficulties with them worth mentioning."

Slurp. "And Goyle's young ward, Amaryllis Wilkes?"

The boy hesitated. Harry had told him of Lord Goyle's plan to possibly marry Amy off to Tiberius Nott, a man more than forty years her senior, as part of a monstrous plot to somehow acquire the missing Wilkes fortune. Was this where his father was going?

"I haven't spent that much time with her to be honest. She's a year behind me after all."

Tiberius nodded. "And besides, I suppose so much of your time is monopolized by the Potter Heir, isn't it?"

*"And finally now we stop dancing and get to the heart of it!"* Theo cocked his head to the side as if contemplating the matter. "I would hardly say he monopolizes it, Father, but he is the Heir to an Ancient and Noble House, though obviously not one with which we normally associate. Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter each have their own circle of friends. I found Potter's both easier to enter and potentially more lucrative to House Nott."

"Did you indeed, Theodore?" Just a hint of coldness crept into the former Death Eater's voice, but Theo refused to be intimidated.

"Yes, father, I did indeed. Although there is no love between House Potter and House Nott, Harry Potter *loathes* his parents and has almost as much disdain for his brother, the Boy-Who-Lived. But he has been able to conceal that disdain for the most part, and now has influence over Lord Potter, who is also the new Chief Auror. Was I *wrong* to

develop a relationship with him? Harry *is* a Slytherin, after all. Just like us."

Tiberius said nothing at first. He simply stared at his son with the ghost of a smile and an altogether disturbing gleam in his eyes. "Just like ... *us*, you say? What an ... interesting way to put it, my son. Perhaps sometime soon we'll have more opportunities to, shall we say, *explore all our commonalities*."

Theo said nothing. Once again, he thought that there was some subtext to his father's words that he was missing beyond the obvious one of their barely concealed mutual hatred for one another.

"But that comes later," Nott continued. "Finish your tea and then go up to your room and get freshened up. You said you had '*no difficulties*' with Crabbe and Goyle *fil*s. Perhaps tonight we can improve your relations with them. We'll be hosting the Crabbes and the Goyles this evening at eight o'clock sharp. Formal attire of course."

The boy blinked a few times as he processed this. "The Crabbes and Goyles are coming here tonight, Father? May I ask why?"

"Can not an old widower open up his musty old home to entertain two men who were once his comrades in arms, along with their families."

"Comrades ... in arms?" Theo said carefully.

"Well," Tiberius said with a nasty smirk. "That's how I choose to remember them. Comrades in arms from those awful, awful days when we were all three Imperiused into serving the Dark Lord. Totally against our will, as you well know."

Theo nodded at that but said nothing. After a few more seconds, he stood and bowed respectfully to his father and then left for his room. Once inside, he leaned his back against the door, closed his eyes, and exhaled heavily. Then, he surveyed the bedroom that hadn't been slept in for nearly two years. There was a faint mustiness to the room, but the house elves had dutifully kept it clean and free of dust. He passed into the en suite bathroom and washed his face. When he came back out, he noticed that his dress robes that had been in his trunk were hanging from the closet door, freshly pressed. He examined them briefly and then moved over to open the dresser which was already full of his Hogwarts clothes.

For several seconds, Theo stared down at the clothing which had also been in his trunk as if lost in thought. Then, he quickly opened the trunk and confirmed that it was completely empty. Theo hesitated, and despite his considerable Occlumency skills, he noticed that his heart was beating faster. Slowly, he reached down to the base of the trunk and tapped a particular knot in the polished pine with a rhythmic pattern. An invisible seam in the wood opened up to reveal the secret compartment in which he'd concealed his Notice-Me-Not ring, his poison detecting monocle, his Occlumency books, and all the other things which his older brother had given him without their father's permission to help protect him both from enemy's at Hogwarts and enemies much closer to home.

For nearly five seconds, Theo forgot how to breath. The secret compartment was empty, and all the magical items within were gone, presumably taken by Lord Nott's house elves when they emptied his trunk. Theo slid down to the floor with his back against the trunk and put his face in his hands.

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### ***That night ...***

All things considered, dinner went surprisingly well. Tiberius insisted that Theo sit at his left hand at the long dinner table, but he had not been called upon to make much small talk with the grownups. After dessert, Lord Nott ordered Theo to lead the other children to the parlor and entertain them "with Exploding Snap or whatever you children play nowadays." The adults would retire to the Billiard Room for drinks and discussion. Once in the parlor, Theo led Greg, Vincent, Amy, and Drusilla through a quick game of Snitch Snatcher, a board game version of Quidditch. Over the course of the game, Theo discreetly gave Amy the signal Harry had devised and shared with his Slytherin allies that indicated he needed a distraction. After allowing Drusilla to win the first game, Amy announced that she needed to use the facilities and would Theo please show her where they were. Gallantly, he led the girl out of the room while the other three set up for another game.

"So where are we really going?" Amy whispered as Theo led her down the gloomy oak-paneled corridors of Nott Hall. She shuddered as she spoke – aside from being dimly lit, the walls were covered by the spoils of Lord Nott's many hunting expeditions. Among his other eccentricities, the man was an enthusiastic amateur taxidermist.

"We aren't going anywhere," Theo replied. "*You* are going to the loo, while I am doing some sneaking about. There's actual security that has to be bypassed where I'm going, and since you don't know this place as well as I do, you'd only get us caught." He stopped in front of a large door. "Here's the toilet. Spend as much time here as you think seems plausible. If I'm not here when you get back, head on back to the others and make up some excuse for me." He

paused. "Tell the Crabbes that I've gone to get snacks. They'll buy that."

"Theo," Amy asked tentatively. "Are you in some kind of trouble?"

He smiled wanly. "Amy, we're the blood traitor children of Death Eaters. When are we not in trouble?"

With that, he headed off around the corner and then paused long enough to twist a wall sconce. A small door opened in the wood paneling, and the boy darted inside. Quickly, he made his way through the nest of secret passages in the manor, deftly bypassing the alarms Tiberius had put into place. Soon, he was standing in front of a glass window that overlooked the billiard room. Or at least, it was a glass window from the side Theo was facing. From the perspective of those on the other side, it was a rather lurid moving portrait of Acteon being transfigured into a stag and then ripped apart and devoured by his own hounds as punishment for surprising the goddess Diana as she bathed. As Tiberius had happily explained to Theo years earlier, the moving painting had been commissioned by the former Lord Decius Nott back in the mid-19th century to celebrate a successful hunt. The "model" for Acteon was a poor Muggle who had been hunted down and killed by Decius and some of his friends prior to the ban on Muggle Hunting, and the portrait was drawn from Decius's cherished memories of the event. From Theo's side of the painting, the poor Muggle's death was only a faint after-image repeated over and over again, which he did his best to ignore as he watched and listened to the scheming of his father and the other four Death Eaters who had come calling to seek his favor.

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**20 June 1993**

**8:00 a.m.**

Theo had risen at dawn, as was now his practice, for a brisk thirty minute jog around the grounds. As he ran, the boy reached out with his magical senses to get a feel for the placement of the estate's wards. He couldn't tell what each ward did, but during his brief tutelage with Lord Malfoy, he'd learned to tell where wards were and how to identify any that were physically dangerous. He was mildly surprised to note that the estate did not appear to have any wards that could instantly incapacitate or injure intruders as Malfoy Manor did. Instead, there only appeared to be alarm wards although, of course, it was always possible that those alarms could trigger some other magical effect that was beyond his perception. His magical senses were still quite weak, and he'd not had a chance at Hogwarts to refine them since there were just *too many* wards at the school for a beginner to make sense of.

He returned to the house, got a quick bath (Lord Nott disapproved of showers as being "Mugglish"), and then went down for breakfast which was served in the main dining hall where the formal dinner had taken place the night before. Then, Theo had sat at his father's left hand. This morning, they were at opposite ends of the long table more than twenty feet apart.

"Good morning, Theodore!" Tiberius said jovially as Theo entered. The greeting actually startled the boy - Tiberius not had never wished him a good morning in his entire life. He took a deep breath and smiled as cheerfully as he could manage.

"Good morning, Father," he replied easily as he took a seat. There was already a plate in front of him with half of a



grapefruit on it. Theo sighed. One of Tiberius's few quirks that could be considered merely annoying rather than horrifying was his insistence that everyone in the household eat the same three-course breakfast every morning: half a grapefruit, a plate of scrambled eggs and sausages, and a strawberry blintz for dessert. When the boy had arrived at Hogwarts, he'd actually been amazed at the diversity of breakfast foods available, since he'd assumed everyone else in the world ate the same thing every morning as well. Silently resigning himself to a summer of breakfast monotony, he sliced into the grapefruit with his spoon.

"Did you enjoy your time spent with your schoolmates last night, Theodore?"

"Yes, Father. It was quite enjoyable. Did you have an enjoyable time with the parents?"

"Mmm," Tiberius said around the huge chunk of grapefruit that filled his mouth. "Enjoyable and profitable." He reached for a napkin to wipe away the grapefruit juice that had dribbled down the side of his face before continuing. "It seems that Duncan and Gregory Sr. both see more advantage to joining my camp than remaining in Malfoy's, particularly since the fool has apparently become a Muggle-lover. I always thought he was weak ... him and his spawn." Tiberius gave Theo a funny look at that.

"There have been rumors that Lord Malfoy was no longer able to afford to pay the Wizengamot dues for their Houses. Something to do with his divorce from Draco's mother."

Tiberius barked out a laugh and then attacked his grapefruit once more with gusto. "I've no doubt. Poncey fool never deserved a woman like her."

Theo looked up in surprise but resisted the temptation to ask his father about his sudden appreciation for Narcissa Black, opting instead for safer ground. "If Lord Malfoy is truly unable to pay for his vassals, do you plan to swear them to House Nott?"

"In time," he replied. "Their oaths to House Malfoy are still valid through the end of the year. In January, though, heh-heh, we'll see some changes I wager."

"*Yeah, Dad,*" Theo thought to himself as he picked at his breakfast. "*Including a marriage announcement!*"

The boy was still sickened by what he'd learned the night before while spying upon his father's meeting with the other Death Eaters. Goyle was really going to do it! He was really going to sign off on a marriage contract between Amy Wilkes and Tiberius Nott, in exchange for a lump sum payment of half-a-million galleons to House Goyle plus ten percent of whatever eventually gets recovered from the missing Wilkes fortune after Tiberius had sired a son with his child bride. Except that the Wilkes fortune apparently wasn't missing after all – all the Death Eaters at the meeting the previous night knew that whatever Erasmus Wilkes had left behind was contained in an impregnable vault somewhere beneath the ruins of Wilkes Manor, but it was only accessible to whoever held the title of Lord Wilkes ... though apparently *Regent* Wilkes might have just as much access if the next Lord Wilkes was an infant.

It took all of Theo's emotional self-control to resist his urge to hex his father. Not that it would do any good, as the man was a skilled duelist and also protected by magical defenses built into the manor house itself while he was on the grounds. The one bright spot was that the Death Eaters believed that Lucius Malfoy would likely oppose the

marriage while Goyle remained his vassal, which meant that Harry had until January of 1994 to work one of his patented Potter miracles.

The two Notts made idle chitchat as they finished their respective grapefruits. Rogo cleared away the dishes and then brought in the second course on two covered plates. The elf removed the cover from Lord Nott's plate, and he tore into a sausage aggressively. Then, Rogo placed the other covered plate before Theo, and as the boy picked up his knife and fork, the elf pulled the cover away. But there was no food on the dish.

Instead, there was a silver ring, a brass monocle, two books, and several other minor magical trinkets – in short, everything that Alex had entrusted to his little brother and that the boy had kept hidden in the secret compartment of his trunk.

For several seconds, the room was silent save for the scraping of Tiberius Nott's knife and fork as he calmly devoured his eggs and sausages. "How's your breakfast, son?" he finally inquired in a cold voice.

Theo leaned back in his chair and looked his father squarely in the eye. For a second, the boy expected some kind of Legilimency attack, but nothing came. As he'd suspected, Tiberius had never had the patience or self-control to learn the art. Indeed, Theo suspected that Tiberius didn't even know any Occlumency beyond the bare minimum he'd needed to conceal his status as a Death Eater.

"Well, *Father*, the grapefruit was alright, but the second course doesn't look like it would be very filling." As casually as he could, Theo wiped his own mouth with his napkin and then placed it on his lap. As he did, he carefully moved his

hand towards the wand in his pocket. He needn't have bothered. Rogo snapped his fingers, and the wand flew out of its resting place, hovered in the air for a few seconds, and then gently floated down to the serving tray to join the other magical items. Theo glared at the crippled elf who merely shrugged.

Tiberius snorted cruelly. "Now then, Theodore. I find myself with a mystery to solve ... and a punishment to levy. I see two possibilities. The first is that you *stole* these heirlooms of House Nott from your brother to whom they had been entrusted, a crime that demands harsh punishment. The second is that your brother *gave* you those heirlooms for your own use. That seems unlikely to me, of course. Alexander did *ask* me if he could give you some of those objects when it was time for you to go to Hogwarts, but I *expressly forbade* him from doing so. Still, if he *defied* me..."

The man gave every appearance of careful consideration, but Theo wasn't fooled. This was a prepared speech.

"Alexander is my Heir Apparent, and the law bars me from properly punishing him for all but the most serious of infractions. But defying a direct order *not* to mishandle family heirlooms?! *That* is something for which the law would allow me to properly chastise him for his disobedience despite the protections of his Heirship. And I *would* chastise him most harshly for defying me in this manner."

Tiberius tilted his head and smiled. "You've experienced such chastisement in the past when your misdeeds have forced me to take up my fatherly duties, Theodore. Which made a greater impression on you? The lash? Or the cane?"

Theo said nothing at first. He simply reached out for his water glass and took a long sip before offering a reply. "Well, the cane certainly left bigger scars, *Father*. But speaking hypothetically, what would you do if I said it wasn't Alex but *me*? If it turns out that I stole these heirlooms without Alex's knowledge and that he is guilty only of not telling you because he was afraid of how you'd react? What sort of punishment would *I* receive? *Hypothetically*, that is."

The man's smile broadened into a grin. "If you were to *confess*, Theodore? Why in that case, your punishment would be ... *nothing at all*." He paused. "Well, certainly nothing *physical* at least."

Theo's eyes widened. "Oh really?" he said almost sarcastically. "No punishments? That's a bit of a switch for you. You also said '*harsh*' punishment just a second ago. And I recall you being rather enthusiastic at punishment whenever I did something you didn't like. After all, you've only *hated me since the day I saw you MURDER MOTHER!*"

Tiberius's expression seemed almost amiable at that accusation. "Oh that's not true, Theodore - I hated you long before then. *But*, I am being quite truthful. You see, stealing family heirlooms is a crime serious enough to permit me to do what I've wanted to do for a long, long time - kick you out of this family for good."

"What are you talking about? You could have disinherited me any time you wanted!"

"Disinheritance is not enough, you little *bastard!*" the vile man spat. "When I die, Alexander will claim the Lordship, and he would have the power to *reinstate* you. I want you gone forever. And if you were to ... *confess* to the crime of

stealing heirlooms, I would have the right to expel you in a manner that no future Lord Nott could undo. You would cease to be Theodore Nott and instead would become ... Theodore No-Name, at least until you could persuade some other foolish wizard or witch to adopt you into their family. Or perhaps you could persuade someone with a respectable background to marry you. That Mudblood you're so enamored with, perhaps. Either way, it would be no concern of mine."

"You really expect me to believe that you'd just let me go once I'm out of the family? That I should expect you to refrain from trying to *kill me* once I give up my name?"

Tiberius scoffed. "What makes you think your last name can stop me from killing you now? There are more than enough Wizengamot members who share my views and would never tolerate the Lord of an Ancient and Noble House being punished in any way, but certainly not over the death of a rebellious second child who had become an unrepentant blood traitor. But I am being quite truthful in this – once you're no longer a Nott, I swear I'll take no further action against you. Indeed, I will summon our solicitor and swear *an Unbreakable Vow* promising that I will never intentionally seek to harm you and will never deliberately command others to do so in exchange for a confession of your crimes against House Nott. Your inheritance from your mother's dowry will pay for your Hogwarts education with a little left over for living expenses. Other than that, you will walk out of here with your wand and the clothes on your back and nothing else, and Alexander will be unable to provide you with any further assistance in the future. But you will be free of me. And I of you."

Theo sat quietly. More than anything else, he wanted to talk to Harry Potter or at least Blaise Zabini right now. His Occlumency kept him calm and focused, but his particular strain of cunning didn't lend itself to legal maneuvers.

"If I confess as you want, what's to stop you from having me arrested and prosecuted?"

"The legal process that will see you stripped of your name – *Sanctum Ultimo* is its formal name – is considered a punishment that trumps all others where the Noble Houses are concerned, but if you wish, I will also state in my Unbreakable Vow that I will never seek legal redress against you for anything you may have done before today."

The man smiled again, just as cruelly as before. "Of course, all this is conditional on you being the one who stole those heirlooms for your own use. Alexander will be home tomorrow. If you have not confessed, I will ask him whether he was the one responsible and see what he says. Perhaps he'll confess in order to save you. Perhaps he will blame you regardless of the truth to avoid punishment. Perhaps he'll choose one of those options after an hour or so on the rack... with you in attendance as witness. I do hope that all my old equipment is in good working order. It hasn't seen use since ... since I was under the Imperius and the Dark Lord *forced* me to torture Mudbloods and blood traitors. Against my will, as you know."

Theo closed his eyes and centered himself. From the day his mother died until the day Harry Potter called him a friend, there had been exactly one person in the entire world who had cared about him. The rational part of Theo's mind was screaming that there was some trick or hidden trap he couldn't see because he lacked the knowledge of legal process to identify it. That even with an Unbreakable Vow,

there would still be some way for his father to hurt him or maybe even murder him. But the emotional side of him simply didn't care, because the worst thing that Tiberius Nott could do to Theo would be to kill him, and he would rather die than watch his brother Alexander be tortured just for trying to protect him.

"I want to know what the Vow would say before I agree to anything. That and what you want me to say in my ... confession."

Tiberius reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out two rolls of parchment. "As it just so happens..."

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A few hours later, Nott's solicitor, an unusually tall and disturbingly pale man by the name of Mortimer Renwick, had come and gone. Theo had actually been surprised to see the man out and about during the day, as he'd only ever visited the Manor before at night and Theo had always suspected Renwick to be a vampire. He would file the official paperwork on Monday morning, along with a copy of Theo's confession which the boy had been required to write with a blood quill. It had been a long and detailed confession, which was why Theo's left arm was now wrapped up with gauze bandages through which some fresh blood could still be seen. The fact that Theo caught Renwick staring at his bloody arm and licking his lips did little to reassure the boy that he was not, in fact, a vampire.

Once the documents were filed, Theo Nott would officially become Theo No-Name in the eyes of Wizarding Britain, though the solicitor advised that some of the initial effects would be triggered immediately upon Lord Nott signing the paperwork. After Renwick left, Theo had been "allowed" to pick out some clothing he could take with him (specifically



one set of casual wear plus some extra underpants) out of Lord Nott's "generosity." Said clothing, along with the boy's school uniforms, books, and supplies, was unceremoniously tossed into a beaten old trunk pulled down from the attic, one which was not remotely as nice as the trunk he'd used for his first two years at Hogwarts. Theo had also been permitted entry to the kitchens to make himself a sandwich before leaving, but no house elf was permitted to help him. Which was fine with Theo as he wouldn't eat anything prepared by a Nott house elf anyway if he could avoid it.

Just after noon, Theo walked out the front door lugging his battered old trunk behind him. Then, he stopped short and took in the scene. All of his clothing and personal possessions except for what was now in his trunk was in a big pile in the courtyard in front of the house. The picture of Theo's late mother that had hung in his bedroom was perched on top so that he could see her sad face. Tiberius stood next to the pile, and as soon as Theo came out, the man smirked contemptuously before aiming his wand at it. "**INCENDIO.**" As most of the boy's worldly possessions went up in flames, Tiberius sauntered over to him before aiming his wand at the trunk and shrinking it down to pocket size. Theo bent down to pick up the trunk before pocketing it.

"Consider that the last favor I'll ever do for you, Theo No-Name."

"And, ironically, also the first. I don't suppose transportation to ... anywhere other than here is in the cards?"

Tiberius reached into a pocket and flipped a galleon to him. "You're still a wizard, boy. Once you're outside the wards and on the main road, you can call the Knight Bus." Then,

from another pocket, he withdrew Theo's wand and handed it over.

"Thanks," Theo said sarcastically. He turned and looked down the cobblestone driveway. It was about a quarter-mile to the massive archway that marked the entrance to Nott Manor. On either side were tall trees, part of the large forest that surrounded the manor house.

"Well, you'd better hop to it," Tiberius said. "It's a long walk to the main road after all. It's good that you've taken up physical exercise... like a good little Muggle-lover, I suppose." He turned and walked up the steps towards the front door as Theo started down the lane. But then, the former Death Eater turned and called out to his former son.

"Wait!" Theo turned back towards his (ex)father. "Whatever else I am, Theodore No-Name, I am a Nott, and we come from a long line of sportsmen and hunters. It would be unsportsmanlike of me to simply let you leave without advising you of two details. First, I swore an oath that I would never intentionally try to hurt you. Now that you are disowned pursuant to the rite of Sanctumen Ultimo, *I no longer need to hurt you intentionally*. Your future suffering is assured ... *by operation of law*."

Theo stared at the man but refused to give him any satisfaction by asking for any further explanation. He supposed he'd find out soon enough what Tiberius meant. "And the other thing?"

Tiberius smiled like a predator. "It does not contravene my oath never to intentionally hurt you if I simply remove my protection from you and allow events to take their natural course. You are no longer welcome in my home, Theodore No-Name. And Nott Manor has ways of dealing with

intruders." Then, he turned and stalked into the manor, while Theo's attention was drawn to a cracking sound from the roof above.

As Theo watched in horror, three of the stone gargoyles slowly came to life and turned their heads down to stare at them, a low bestial growl coming from each.

Behind the boy, there was a quarter-mile-long private road that led to the front gate. He had no idea how fast the gargoyles could move, but he felt certain they could run him down on a straight path. The boy's face took on a determined expression.

*"Good thing for me I've been trying to figure out how to escape since I was seven!"* he thought to himself before taking off away from both the house and driveway and towards the much closer tree line. Behind him, Theo heard three massive *thumps* followed by the sound of the stone gargoyles in pursuit. Ruefully, he realized he'd been right – the gargoyles sounded remarkably fast for heavy stone constructs.

Luckily, the woods surrounding Nott Manor were dense but also relatively free of predators, whether magical or no. Within seconds, he was into the forest. He risked a glance over his shoulder and was gladdened to see the gargoyles had slowed down since they were too big to duck around trees and hop over obstacles as nimbly as an athletic twelve-year-old boy. Theo gave a silent thanks to Gilderoy Lockhart (or whatever the former DADA professor was calling himself today) for eight months of fairly intense physical education. However much disdain Tiberius Nott had for physical exercise, Theo had been near the top of the Second Years for the PE class, and his time spent running obstacle courses served him well today.

In less than five minutes, a breathless Theo found what he was looking: the fifteen-foot-tall stone wall that marked the physical boundaries of the Nott estate and also the boundary of its wards. And if his memories of this place were correct, less than twenty feet beyond the wall was a public road. The boy's face and arms were full of scratches from the brambles he'd barreled through, and his clothes were torn and muddy. But he was nearly free ... *if* he could get over the wall before the gargoyles caught up with him. Theo ran towards a nearby tree whose heavy branches actually extended up and over the wall. Behind him, there was a crash as one of the gargoyles smashed its way through a hedge bush. He climbed as fast as he could and had just made it up onto a strong branch when the gargoyle leaped at him, missing his foot by inches. Snarling, the beast stepped back and then ran at the base of the tree, slamming into it with its great bulk. The tree shuddered, but Theo held onto the branch with a death-grip and did not fall. The gargoyle slammed into the tree a second time, then a third. The last blow actually made the tree shake and creak a bit. In the distance, Theo could hear the other gargoyles approaching.

The gargoyle started backing away from the tree for another go, and Theo saw his chance. He took a second to balance himself and then ran forward along the thick branch. Just as it started to give from his weight, he jumped and successfully grabbed hold of the top of the wall with both arms. He pulled himself over and dropped to the ground, giving out a pained yell as he twisted his ankle on the landing. A second later, the wall shook as the gargoyle slammed into it from the other side. Theo quickly pulled himself up and hobbled on one good leg towards the nearby road. If the wall truly marked the boundary of the wards, then he was safe.

Unfortunately, it did not. Or perhaps the gargoyles were simply capable of pursuing intruders beyond the Manor's wards. Either way, the gargoyle's forearms and head suddenly came over the top of the wall, and the massive beast struggled to pull itself over and continue the pursuit. Desperately, Theo staggered to the far side of the road as the gargoyle finally got past the wall. It was less than forty feet away, and running away was no longer an option. Theo pulled his wand out of his back pocket. Harry had given him a wand holster as a Christmas present, but unfortunately, it had gone up in flames not fifteen minutes earlier. He held his wand at the ready while the gargoyle prepared to strike. The creature took two slow steps towards Theo and then broke into a running leap.

At the last possible second, Theo thrust his arm out with his wand sticking straight up in the air. Suddenly, there was a flash of light, a squeal of brakes, and a deafening horn, as a purple three-decker bus appeared from nowhere to slam into the gargoyle at incredible speed. The impact hit the gargoyle head on, and it flew down the road, shattering into pieces. Theo peered around the front of the bus and back towards the wall. The heads of the other two gargoyles appeared over the wall as they took in the destruction of their brother.

"One down! Six to go!" the boy yelled out triumphantly. Then, he pulled himself up the steps of the bus. A flustered conductor helped the injured boy up.

"Um, welcome to the Knight Bus, emergency transport for the stranded witch or, ah, wizard. My name is Stan Shunpike and, ah ... *what the hell did we just hit?!*"

Theo took out the galleon his father had given him. "No idea, but they seem to come in threes, so I suggest you get

us moving before the other two come after us."

Stan paled at that. "Alrighty-then. Where to?"

"Longbottom Manor, Lancashire."

"And your name?"

"Theo N..." Theo froze. While he knew that he was no longer a part of the Nott family, he'd started to say his former name out of reflex ... and was surprised to find that he no longer could. The words "Theo Nott" simply wouldn't come out of his mouth.

"No-Name," he finally said in a very quiet voice. "Theo No-Name."

"Hmm," replied Stan. "Does that have a hyphen in it?"

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## **Longbottom Manor**

Lancashire

6:00 p.m.

Exhausted from the days events, Theo relaxed in a comfortable overstuffed chair in the parlor of Longbottom Manor and tried not to wince as Andromeda Tonks rubbed a healing ointment into his sprained ankle. Although she and her husband Ted shared the duties at their small clinic, she was the one who had specialized in pediatric healing. Also present were Lady Augusta, Neville, and Harry. The latter two were a flurry of emotions: relief that their friend had made it to Longbottom Manor safely but also sadness and fury as Theo shared the tale of his adventure. He'd arrived an hour earlier, beaten and exhausted but free, and he'd immediately and formally requested sanctuary from Augusta and Neville, which they were quick to grant.

"The ointment should fix your ankle on your arm by morning, young man," said the healer. "And the Murtlap Essence will have healed all the cuts from the blood quill. And by tomorrow , I'll have a regimen of potions ready for *all the other things* that have been done to you over the last twelve years for which you've never received treatment."

Theo smiled. "Thank you, Healer Tonks."

"I still can't believe he made you use a blood quill to write a whole confession!" said Harry angrily. "I had to sign my name with one once. That was *enough*!"

"Yeah, but enough about my sad, sad life," said Theo. "What are we going to do about Amy?"

"Relax, Theo," Harry said. "We've got time ... and options. Artie and Hestia are working on possible solutions, and you yourself said we've got until next January. I promise you, we'll save her."

In point of fact, Harry *already* had a plan in place to rescue Amy Wilkes from her impending forced marriage (and likely her subsequent murder). It was, however, a risky and wildly Gryffindorish plan that would sacrifice most of his long term agenda and also potentially trigger a national controversy that would make Jim getting outed as a Parselmouth seem inconsequential in comparison. Which was why he was grateful that he still had seven months to come up with a less explosive alternative.

"I'm kinda more interested in what your father did to disown you," said Neville. "I know it's possible to disown a family member, but I've never heard of way that can't be reversed."

"Likewise," said Andi. "And I have some experience in this matter, seeing as how I spent several months as '*Andromeda No-Name*' before Ted and I got married. Theoretically, the next Lord Black could reinstate me, but since that's most likely going to be Narcissa's boy, I'm not holding my breath. Anyway, the first few months of my expulsion were near the end of my last year at Hogwarts, and it was not a pleasant time in my life. But I survived it, and so will you. You have a good group of friends who will support you and, as I understand it, no hostile family members attending Hogwarts. *I* was in school at the same time as Narcissa ... and Tiberius."

"Fath... Tiberius and Narcissa Black actually went to school together?" Theo asked. "He, um, talked about her with ... well, unusual fondness, for him at least. Which, honestly, is something I never imagined him capable of. Did they ever ... date?"

"Oh, it was all so long ago, but I do think they went to Hogsmeade together a few times. That all ended when our father signed her up for a betrothal contract."

"With Lucius Malfoy?" asked Harry.

"Actually, she was *supposed* to marry Cassius Malfoy, Lucius's older brother. He died in an accident in ... '75 or '76, I think, and somehow Lucius ended up marrying her instead. Poor fellow. They never did get along when they were at school together. Divorce is quite rare among wizard-kind, but I'm not at all surprised to see it in their case."

Harry said nothing but simply absorbed that insight into Lucius Malfoy's personal history.



"Were there any other ... complications from losing your family name, Healer Tonks?" Theo asked while trying unsuccessfully to conceal his nervousness. "Tiberius hinted that ... that I might *suffer* from being called Theo No-Name."

"Trust me, Theo," she said authoritatively. "It doesn't hurt in the slightest to be disowned from people who hate you and who you hate back."

Theo smiled wanly. "Yeah, but he said it wasn't just a disownment. It's something special that has to be filed with the Wizengamot tomorrow morning." Theo closed his eyes and summoned up the memory. "*Sanctumen Ultimo*, he called it. Do you know what that is?"

Andi shook her head no, but then she and the three boys were startled when Augusta Longbottom dropped her tea cup to the floor and stared at Theo in shock.

"Theodore," she said intently. "This is very important. Do you mean to say that when your father disowned you, he did so pursuant to the Ultimate Sanction provision of the Inheritance Act?"

Theo looked at her in surprise before stammering an answer. "He never said anything about the Inheritance Act or gave the English translation. He just called it the *Sanctumen Ultimo*. Why?"

But Augusta didn't answer. She was already up and briskly walking towards the floo. A dash of floo powder later, she was practically yelling into the fire. "Podmore Residence, London."

"Gran, what's going on?" asked a suddenly nervous Neville, but the woman shushed him. Seconds later, Artemus

Podmore poked his head into the flames.

"Augusta? What's wrong? Is it something with Harry?" he asked.

"No ... at least not directly, although I'm sure he'll be very interested in what you have to say. Please come through. It's very important"

Three minutes later, Harry's solicitor was seated across from Theo, listening to the boy's story with a grave expression. Then, he turned to the group and explained the history of the Sanctum Ultimo, the Ultimate Sanction.

In 1588, England was attacked by an alliance of wizards and Muggles from Spain led by Duke Estaban de Cortez y Slytherin, the most powerful and influential descendant of Salazar Slytherin alive at the time. The invasion was repulsed by a combination of Muggle seamanship, wizarding weather-manipulation, and copious amounts of luck. While the British victory was a source of immense national pride to the Muggles during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, the Wizengamot took a more jaundiced view of what had been the most serious magical attempt to conquer the nation since the time of William the Conqueror. Their fears were exacerbated by the fact that there remained several British wizarding families, including four who held seats in the Wizengamot itself, who were openly descended from Salazar Slytherin and who were suspected of divided loyalties, if not actual treasonous intent. After much heated discussion, the Wizengamot eventually passed the Inheritance Act of 1588 which enacted sweeping reforms to the process by which Heirs to Wizengamot families could eventually claim their family seats. It also required the various Slytherin-descended families to disclaim their heritage, take new family names, swear allegiance to

Wizarding Britain over all other nations ... and expel any family members who refused to comply. To facilitate this last requirement, the Sanctum Ultimo was added to the Act to *ensure* that no descendant of Salazar Slytherin nor any other wizard whose heritage threatened the body politic would ever be able to make use of his family's resources in the process.

"But ... the Notts aren't descended from Slytherin," Theo said in confusion. "Are we?"

"We have no way of knowing, but it doesn't really matter," Artie said. "The Ultimate Sanction was not limited to Slytherin families even though that was the reason for its passage. It can be used against *any* member of a family with a hereditary Wizengamot seat whose Lord judges that family member guilty of treason or any other action which if left unchallenged threatens the survival of the family."

"Treason?! All I confessed to was stealing a few minor family heirlooms! And I didn't really even do that!"

Artie sighed. "I'm sorry, Theo, but the statute ... doesn't actually define what sorts of crimes can be used to justify the Ultimate Sanction. The Inheritance Act was passed in a time of national panic and included many clauses that in retrospect were ill-advised. The only thing that has prevented misuse of the Ultimate Sanction for the past 400 years has been social convention. And for the most part, that's been enough. There were about a dozen wizards from Slytherin families subjected to the sanction in the immediate aftermath of the law's passage, and no more than a half-dozen in the four centuries since, all of whom were wizards and witches who'd already been sent to Azkaban for serious crimes. I don't think it's been invoked at all in over a hundred years, and I've never heard of a

Wizengamot Lord using it frivolously out of sheer spite towards a family member, but ... I'm afraid nothing in the law actually forbids that."

"How bad is this, Artie?" Harry asked. "What will the effect on Theo be?"

"At its fundamental level, it works sort of like an Oath of Enmity except that it targets an individual with a social curse levied by the Wizengamot rather than calling upon the personal magic of a family head."

"An Oath of Enmity," Theo said. "Like what was going on between the Weasleys and the Malfoys." He shook his head and sighed deeply. "In other words, Alex is going to hate me for the rest of my life. Okay. I ... I can deal with that. Just so long as he's safe."

Artie looked at the boy with profound sadness and then shook his head. "Theo, I'm ... sorry, but ... it's not just your family."

Harry's eyes narrowed at that. "Go on, Artie."

"It's *like* a curse of enmity, but it affects everyone in your former family, plus all their vassals." He took a deep breath. "*Plus* everyone with whom House Nott has sworn a reciprocal oath ... and all of *their* family members and vassals. It's like ... a *web of hatred* that connects to every wizard who's connected to your former house via a magical oath of any kind, no matter how indirect. And since House Nott is an Ancient and Noble House..."

Silence fell on the room. Theo leaned back against the chair and closed his eyes.

"We ... the Notts have reciprocal oaths with everyone who has a Wizengamot seat," he said quietly. "The whole world's going to hate me."

"Theo, come on," said Neville. "That's not true. You'll always have a place here with use. Isn't that right, Gran?" He turned back towards Augusta but was shocked by the stricken look on her face. "Uh, Gran?" He asked again more nervously, but it was Artie who answered.

"Tomorrow morning," he said in a grim voice, "Nott's solicitor will fill the papers sometime around 9 a.m. Shortly thereafter, every member of the Wizengamot, all of their families, all of their employees, and even anyone they've loaned money too will all be affected. When any of those people even *think* about Theo, they will immediately feel an overpowering sense of dislike. They will distrust everything he says. They will believe any negative stories they hear about him and discount any positive stories."

"You mean they'll act towards Theo like Muggles do around me," said Harry bitterly. Artie looked at him in surprise. "It's okay, Artie. Everyone here knows."

Artie had an almost pained expression on his face. "I see. Well, you're right. The reactions will be similar, although we have checked you for magic similar to this, and your ... condition is not related. And I don't think the Ultimate Sanction will likely trigger any violent responses against Theo, just gestures of contempt or dislike." He turned to Neville. "And yes, Neville, as Heirs to Ancient and Noble Houses, you and Harry will both be affected. Your Heir's ring won't protect you, Neville. If anything, it will make the effect more pronounced. Harry will be less affected because of his Occlumency training, but even then there will be problems."

"Such as?" Harry said in a clipped voice. Artie looked back to him and was mildly startled. The boy's eyes looked ... greener than usual.

"Ahem. Well, with your level of Occlumency, it would be possible for you to block out the imposed feeling of enmity, though it would likely be exhausting to do so constantly. However, those who can resist the effect and who choose to associate with Theo for extended periods of time will *also* eventually become subject to the enmity albeit in a lesser form. If you maintain an open friendship with Theo at Hogwarts, eventually your fellow students who are affected will look upon you the same way they do him. The safest course would be to publicly feign a dislike for him while keeping your continued friendship a secret. And if your friendship came out, it *might* be something your father could use against you."

"Harry..." Theo began, but Harry interrupted without even looking towards him.

"What about teachers at Hogwarts? Is there anyone who *won't* be affected? Surely Dumbledore won't start to hate Theo because of this."

"Teachers and staff will not be affected, as Hogwarts is shielded by its treaties with the Wizengamot and the Ministry. I imagine Muggleborns will be unaffected, as will most Halfblood students whose parents are neither Ministry employees nor bound by oath to any Noble House. Ministry employees and their families may or may not be affected depending upon their department. Healers are immune, since their oaths are to provide healing regardless of personal feelings about their patients. Likewise solicitors like myself."

"So how do we *end* it?" Neville interrupted angrily. "Lord Nott talked about adoption or marriage..."

"Yes," said Andromeda. "That is how I was able to take Ted's family name."

Artie shrugged. "Marriage would do it, I suppose, but both you and your prospective spouse would have to be over the age of seventeen and also have the approval of your spouse's head of house. Adoption could theoretically be done faster, but not just anyone can adopt Theo under these circumstances. As a practical matter, only another Noble family could do it, and they could *only* avoid falling under the Sanction if a member of the family owed Theo a life debt or if some comparable level of oath magic was in play."

"Theo saved my life," said Neville firmly. "And we've already offered him sanctuary."

"Neville," said Augusta gently. "While you may feel that Theo helped to save you back during your first year at Hogwarts, the actual requirements for a true life debt were not satisfied. You don't actually owe him a life debt. I'm sorry, but we cannot simply ... adopt Theo." She looked over to the other boy sadly. "No matter how much I would like to."

Theo smiled at her. "I appreciate that, Lady Augusta."

"Would the Sanction survive the death of Lord Nott himself?" Harry asked in a cold voice. A hush fell on the room as everyone turned to look at him. After a few seconds, Artie coughed softly into his hand.

"Yes. Yes, I'm ... afraid it would. Short of the two procedures I've outlined to secure a *new* name for Theo, the effects of the Sanction will last for the rest of his life and be passed on

to any children he has. Historically, most people subjected to the Sanctum Ultimo eventually fled the country rather than spend their entire lives as ... untouchables."

At that moment, there was a sudden flair of light from the fireplace and a voice called through.

"Longbottom Manor!" Theo's eyes widened in recognition and surprise. "This is Alexander Nott of House Nott. With your permission, I'd like to come through to see my brother."

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At Theo's request, Lady Augusta quickly allowed his brother through. Though Theo had talked about him often, this was the first time Harry had seen the older Nott brother. A Sixth Year at Durmstrang, Alex looked like a taller and fitter version of his brother, though he wore his hair short, almost in a buzzcut, compared to Theo's shaggy moptop. He was still wearing part of a Durmstrang uniform when he came through the floo and bowed to Lady Augusta.

"Your ladyship, I hope you will forgive my forwardness, but I fear my time may be short. Might I speak to my brother alone. I swear on my fam... on the honor of my school that I will give all due respect to your hospitality."

Augusta nodded at his self-introduction and then directed the two brothers to the nearby library. As soon as they were gone, Harry went over to speak with Artie who argued quietly with him for a few minutes before they heading to over the floo themselves. To Neville's surprise, they were going to Potter Manor. Meanwhile, Andromeda stood lost in thought for a moment before heading through the floo herself to the Tonks Clinic.



Minutes later, when Alex and Theo were alone, the older boy pulled his sibling into a tight embrace. Finally able to relax his self-control for the first time in days, Theo broke down and wept into Alex's chest.

"I'm sorry ... it's all my fault! I sh-should have hidden those things better. I'm so sorry, Alex."

"Shhh, Theo! Stop that. It's not your fault. It's all mine, not yours!"

Theo looked up at the other boy. "How can it be your fault? You weren't even there!"

Alex stepped back with a sad expression. "Theo, Father's known that I gave you the ring and the other heirlooms since last summer."

Theo could only stare, dumbstruck.

"He demanded the ring back last July when you were at the Malfoys. He needed it for something. Still don't know what. But when I couldn't produce it, he knew I'd given it to you and demanded that I tell him what else I'd given you." Alex ran his hands through his thin hair. "We had a big row over it. Finally, I gave him an ultimatum."

Theo did a double-take. "*You ... gave him* an ultimatum?"

Alex nodded. "I was confirmed as Heir Apparent by that point, and in another year, I'll be of age. I told him that if he didn't leave you alone, I'd go to the DMLE and denounce him as a Death Eater. Say I had proof that he'd faked being under the Imperius. We went round and round and finally ... we cut a deal." He looked down at the floor, his face flushed with shame. "I'm just sorry I wasn't clever enough to make it a better one."

The younger boy stared at Alex in confusion. "What kind of deal?"

"We swore an Unbreakable Vow. He was supposed to leave you alone. He wouldn't hurt you. He wouldn't disown you. He wouldn't do anything to interfere with your Hogwarts education." Alex blinked away his own tears of frustration. "The oath he swore to you this morning? There wasn't anything in it that he hadn't already sworn to." He shook his head ruefully. "It was all my fault. If I hadn't pushed so hard, he'd have never started looking for a loophole and never found that damnable Ultimate Sanction!"

Theo stood very quiet, almost without breathing. The knowledge that the elder Nott's Unbreakable Vow from this morning was meaningless was less important than what else Alex had said. "You *both* swore an Unbreakable Vow? Alex, what did you swear? What was *your* part of it?"

The boy sighed loudly. "Luckily nothing too bad. So long as he doesn't try to harm you, I'm bound not to reveal any family secrets. I can still talk to you for the time being because ..." he drifted off.

*"Because he'll continue thinking of me as family until tomorrow morning."* Theo thought ruefully. "What else?" he asked urgently. "Tell me!"

"Nothing worth mentioning," Alex replied.

"*ALEX!*" Theo practically yelled. Finally, Alex shook his head.

"Like I said, nothing important. You know that father's insane, especially when it comes to the Dark Lord. He's convinced that You-Know-Who will come back from the grave someday and lead the Purebloods to glory. It's all

rubbish, of course. Dead is dead. I even asked Headmaster Karkaroff about it one time – it's not common knowledge, but he was a Death Eater in his youth – and he was emphatic that the Dark Lord was dead for good. So when Father demanded it in exchange for his oath to leave you be, I swore that if the impossible happened and the Dark Lord returned bodily, I would swear allegiance to him and take the Dark Mark."

Alex shook his head and laughed at the absurdity of his father's demand. "Like I said. Nothing worth mentioning."

Theo could only stare speechless with horror at his older brother who had unwittingly sold his soul on Theo's behalf and gotten nothing to show for it.

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An hour later, it was time for Alex to say goodbye. Harry and Artie had returned from Potter Manor after less than twenty minutes, and whatever had happened left Harry mad enough to spit nails. Soon after, Andromeda also returned, with Ted Tonks along for the ride. Alex gave Theo one last hug before he left and whispered one last farewell.

"Just remember. When we see each other again, the Sanction may make me act terribly towards you, but remember – *it's not me*. In my heart, Theo, I will *never* stop loving you."

Then, Alex Nott wiped his eyes and stepped back through the floo to Nott Hall. He would never recognize Theo as his brother again.

The rest continued to talk until well after midnight. After a long private conversation, Ted and Andromeda Tonks announced that they would take in Theo for the summer. As Ted was a Muggleborn and Andi was disowned from her

House, neither would be affected by the Sanction. They could not formally adopt the boy, but so long as their fostering was kept quiet, they would suffer no adverse reaction from putting a roof over his head. They would return to Hogsmeade tonight and prepare a room while Theo spent one last night with Harry and Neville.

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## ***21 June 1993***

The Tonkses returned for Theo the next morning and transported him back to their clinic-slash-home for the summer. Augusta, suddenly no longer hungry, excused herself, leaving Neville and Harry to finish their breakfast in relative silence.

"So," Neville said after a few minutes. "We never got round to talking about it last night, but what happened when you went to Potter Manor."

"Nothing," Harry spat. "*Literally* nothing. James said that he's sorry, but there's no legal options to prevent Tiberius from using the Sanction against Theo. He *did* promise to talk to Pettigrew and see if there were any legal hurdles they could throw up to stop the Nott-Wilkes wedding. And while I may not care for Peter Pettigrew very much, he *is* a good lawyer. He may be ... *sketchy* but it's not like he's a Death Eater or anything."

Neville nodded and ate his breakfast in silence for a few minutes.

"What?" Harry finally said. Neville looked up at him in surprise. "You want to ask me something but are nervous about it. Natural legilimens, remember?"

The other boy made a face. "*That's* going to get annoying, I think." He played with his food for few seconds before speaking again. "Last night ... what you asked Artie ... about whether Lord Nott's death would end the Sanction... How serious were you?"

Then, it was Harry's turn to play with his food for a while. "I ... dunno. If it would save Theo from ... well, what *I've* had to live with for my whole life, then yeah, I think I would try to arrange Tiberius Nott's death." He looked up nervously. "Do you think ... less of me for saying that?"

"No, because it's a moot point. But Harry, I remember what you asked me back in First Year. About how you wanted me to be a compass for you. And I take that seriously. Jumping straight to murdering somebody as nearly your first thought? Your compass is a little worried that you might be heading in the wrong direction."

Harry nodded but said nothing. After all, he *did* ask Neville to act as a moral compass for him. And he still thought he needed one. Intellectually, he understood that a boy of his age shouldn't be thinking about the practicality of murder as a way to achieve an objective. And yet, he'd been ready to kill Draco in First Year and been prevented by a minor miracle from killing Ron Weasley in his Second. He was a Slytherin being groomed to become the *Prince* of Slytherin, a position for which ruthlessness was an essential trait. And he was now being mentored by two former Princes, both of whom had body counts of their own. But he still recalled what Dumbledore and Scrimgeour had said as well. That killing *changes* a wizard. And Harry feared that such changes might be irrevocable.

"My compass ... should relax. Killing Tiberius Nott wouldn't help Theo at all. It might even make things worse for him ...

and for me. Anyway, I'll ... think about what you said. Thanks Neville."

Neville smiled and returned to his eggs and toast. A few minutes later, Harry shuddered involuntarily and looked around the room.

"What?" Neville asked.

"I dunno. Felt weird for a second. Like that Muggle expression. '*Somebody just walked over my grave.*'"

Neville made a face. "Muggles have weird expressions."

Harry sighed. "I suppose so."

The two were silent for a few more minutes. Then, Neville grew thoughtful. "So are you going to try to stay friends with Theo now? No matter what the cost?"

"Absolutely. We'll try to stay discreet about it, I suppose, but I don't turn my back on my friends. And you?"

Neville said nothing for a while, and Harry studied him casually. "I dunno," Neville said. "I mean it's awful what happened to him. But when all is said and done, Theo's still the son of a Death Eater. Who knows? Maybe Theo has that kind of evil inside himself. You'd expect that from someone who was raised by Tiberius Nott, wouldn't you?"

Harry bit on a piece of toast and chewed it slowly. He felt a strange coldness creeping into the pit of his stomach. "Maybe?" he finally said noncommittally.

"I mean, yes, I do owe Theo for telling me about what Remembralls did back in First Year. But was he really helping me out of the kindness of his heart? Or was he

trying to manipulate me somehow? Maybe I should wait and see how everyone else reacts before I commit to staying his friend. What do you think?"

Harry swallowed and looked over Neville's shoulder at the clock on the wall. It read *9:05*. The Ultimate Sanction was in effect, and it had already twisted Neville's feelings and emotions.

"If that's your decision, Neville, I respect it," Harry said in a quiet voice. But his inner voice said something very different.

*"Death Eaters,"* he thought furiously. *"I really hate Death Eaters."*

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***40 DAYS UNTIL AZKABAN***

## **Prelude (Hermione & Blaise)**

### **Chapter 2: HERMIONE GRANGER AND THE REVENGE OF THE BLACK HAND**

**28 June 1993**

**Amerigo Vespucci Airport  
Florence, Italy**

As the jet touched down smoothly, Hermione Granger smiled as she contemplated the wonders of Muggledom that most of her classmates could not imagine. Two and a half hours from London to Florence via Muggle conveyance! The only thing wizards had that would have been both faster and safer was an International Portkey which, according to Blaise, made most travelers violently ill in the aftermath. After two years at Hogwarts, the young witch was still continually amazed at the potential of magic, but she was still a Muggleborn at heart, and her magical knowledge only heightened her appreciation of what Muggles could achieve without such benefits. She'd mentioned to Lavender Brown that she and her parents be spending a few weeks this summer in Florence, and the other girl had actually asked how long it would take to travel by steamboat. Lavender (who was highly intelligent herself and well-versed on magical matters) had been aware of the existence of "planes" but seemed to think that Muggles were still limited to World War I era biplanes, and she was almost disbelieving when Hermione explained the entire concept of modern jets and the fact that every major city had an airport through which thousands of Muggles passed every day to travel the world.

Beside her, Dan and Emma Granger chatted amiably with each other, but there was a slight undercurrent of tension



between them. The two dentists lived quite comfortably and were experienced travelers, and they had even been to Tuscany twice before, though this was the first time with their daughter in tow. However, this was the first time either of them would be staying in a magical home, and while Blaise reassured Hermione that the Countess Zabini's villa just outside Florence was "Muggle-friendly," she knew that this would be her parents' first real exposure to the lifestyle their only child had chosen to embrace. Indeed, the Grangers had already gotten an unpleasant exposure to the magical world after Hermione had spent two days the previous week in bed rather violently ill – the expected but still disagreeable side effect of drinking the Italian Language Potion. The girl was now completely fluent in Italian (with the mildly annoying exception of Italian words which did not come into usage until after 1932, the last time the potion had been updated), but her reaction to the Educational Potion was still rather alarming to the two medically-trained Muggles.

After disembarking, the Grangers made their way through customs and on to the baggage area where they quickly spotted the hulking form of Gunther Hagrid, the Countess's manservant and chauffeur, who was holding a cardboard sign that said "GRANGERS." Hermione had been somewhat surprised to learn from Blaise that Gunther was a cousin to Rubeus Hagrid, the Hogwarts groundskeeper. Other than their unusual size and bulk, the two looked nothing alike. Though huge and imposing, Gunther was not nearly as big as his cousin, and where Hagrid was notable for his shaggy black mane of hair and his incredibly thick beard, Gunther had close-cropped red hair and a neatly trimmed goatee. Gunther never attended Hogwarts and apparently had no magic of his own, but his eyes gleamed with an intelligence and cunning that spoke of years spent learning from the School of Hard Knocks, especially when compared to the

dreaminess Hermione found in the eyes of the gentle and somewhat naive half-giant.

Standing next to Gunther was her friend Blaise who smiled and waved as soon as he saw her. The boy was in casual yet stylish Muggle attire: a blue silk shirt and khaki trousers. As the Grangers drew near, he held out his arms in a welcoming gesture.

"*Buongiorno!* Welcome to Florence!" He then proffered his hand to Dan Granger who shook it firmly. When Emma offered hers, he took it and gave her a hand-kiss. Finally, he gave Hermione a warm hug. "If you'll come this way, we'll get your baggage and head for the car. We need to make a quick stop to register Hermione's wand with the Italian Ministry since she's underage, and then we'll head to the villa."

The ride to the Ministry offices was uneventful save for the surprise the Grangers registered when the Countess's vintage Bentley turned out to be bigger on the inside than the outside. On the way there, Blaise politely answered the Grangers' questions about magical and Muggle Florence. Though the Countess enjoyed what Muggles would describe as a jet-setting lifestyle, her villa in Tuscany was among her favorite homes and she spent a good portion of each year there. Indeed, since Blaise had started his magical education, he had spent the majority of his summers in Florence on account of Magical Italy's comparatively lax views on underage magic. Unlike Britain's blanket ban on all magic performed by minors, Italy simply placed a Charm on all wands held by minors which would prevent them from functioning at all if directly observed by any Muggles. The Italian Trace would also record all spells performed while the minor was in public. There was no danger of a Muggle directly witnessing underage magic, and any

underage spells cast otherwise would be logged and evaluated to see if the spell either threatened the Statute of Secrecy or otherwise had been cast with malicious, reckless, or criminal intent.

"That actually seems a much more sensible way of doing things than what the British Ministry does," said Dan Granger. "Why don't the British do it that way?"

Blaise shrugged. "So long as the Statute of Secrecy is honored, the ICW grants each member nation the right to monitor and control underage magic however its government wishes. My cynical theory is that the British approach – a blanket ban that can be overcome for minors whose parents can pay exorbitant fees for summer lessons – is just a way for the Ministry to bilk rich Purebloods who want their children to remain advantaged over Halfbloods and Muggleborns."

"That's very cynical indeed," said Emma. The boy smiled.

"I am Italian, *Signora* Granger. We're all cynical when it comes to government action."

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The procedure for registering Hermione's wand was swift, surprisingly so. The bureaucrat in charge of the process was haughty and dismissive of the "English tourist *streghe*" for all of eight seconds before Blaise introduced himself as the son of "*la Contessa Zabini*" at which point he nearly tripped and fell down to the floor in his haste to expedite the process.

The group arrived at the Villa Zabini just in time for lunch. The Countess herself (fashionable as ever in a floral sun dress) met the group on the front steps with a florid welcome offered in English with a heavy Italian accent. She

then kissed all three Grangers on the cheek and congratulated Emma Granger on marrying "such a handsome and virile-looking man" as Dan, a comment which caused Dan to blush, Blaise and Hermione to wince, and Emma to respond with the least convincing smile Hermione had ever seen on her face.

Over a luncheon out on the poolside terrace, the Countess laid out her proposed itinerary for the Grangers over the next three weeks, one involving trips to museums, vineyards, spas, and other attractions for the adults while Hermione spent her time with Blaise and his magical tutors while also exploring Magical Italy with Blaise, Gunther, and the Countess herself. Left unsaid was that Hermione would also be spending time with Blaise's Occlumency tutor for a crash course in a borderline illegal discipline that carried a significant risk to her mental health. There were some things, after all, that one's Muggle parents simply didn't need to now. Regardless, the Grangers accepted the Countess's proposed itinerary, but they did want to spend some time with their daughter, and the Countess reassured them that there would be plenty of time for "family excursions."

The Countess also explained that Mr. and Mrs. Granger would be staying in the villa's east wing, while Hermione would be staying in the west wing where Blaise and the Countess's own rooms were located. The villa had been extensively modernized after the Countess had purchased it, but there remained problems with integrating magic and technology. Consequently, the east wing had Muggle amenities such as electric lights and cable television while the west wing lacked such accouterments but replaced them with things like magical lighting and heating and, of course, house elves to attend to the needs of magical guests. The Countess glossed over the topic of "house elves"

smoothly in a way that left the Grangers the impression that they were paid servants, and Hermione said nothing to disabuse them of that notion.

After lunch, Blaise showed Hermione to her suite in the west wing. Once inside, the witch finally felt free to talk.

"Right," she began, "what are we going to do about poor Theo?"

"Ah, you've heard. From Harry, I suppose?"

"Of course," she replied while sitting down on the bed. "From what Harry wrote, I shouldn't be affected by this Ultimate Sanction nonsense since I'm Muggle-born. Do *you* feel any differently about Theo?"

Blaise shook his head no. "The Zabinis are not a part of the Wizengamot. Mother has British citizenship but beyond that has no oaths that bind her or me to the government. I shouldn't be directly affected." He sat down in a chair facing the bed.

"What about *indirectly* affected?" she asked with just a faint hint of suspicion.

Blaise shrugged. "Anyone not directly affected by the Sanction who maintains a public friendship with Theo will eventually draw the hostility of everyone who *is* affected. Theo and Harry both apparently know that. I assume Theo will be fine if we maintain a discreet relationship with him. I'm sure he'd rather have allies who can actually help him under the table than friends who are stuck in the same miserable boat at him."

Hermione looked doubtful at that. Blaise sighed.

"And of course," he continued, "being a *Gryffindor*, you are more inclined to make a grand gesture of friendship even if your own house turns on you as a result."

"I've considered the matter since I got Harry's letter. Out of my Gryffindor year-mates, the only ones likely to be affected are Lavender, Ron, and possibly Jim, though he might be immune since his mother is a Hogwarts teacher. I want to stay friends with Theo, truly I do. And as a Gryffindor, I shouldn't be afraid of what others say about that."

"But...?" Blaise prompted.

She sighed in frustration. "*But* I saw last year first hand how brutally my fellow Gryffindors can turn on someone who offends their sensibilities, and I expect those affected will be at least as hostile towards Theo and any who stick with them as they were towards the Boy-Who-Lived after he was exposed as a Parselmouth. It's ... an intimidating prospect."

"So we'll take it one day at a time and see what happens." He stood up once more. "In the meantime, come on. I'll give you a tour of the villa. I imagine you're just dying to know where the Zabini library is."

The way Hermione's eyes lit up with excitement showed how right he was.

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## ***29 June 1993***

The next day Hermione, Blaise, and the Grangers made use of the villa's swimming pool for most of the morning. Then, after lunch, Gunther delivered the Grangers to Florence's historic city-center for sight-seeing before conveying Hermione and Blaise to a meeting with Blaise's Occlumency

tutor. Hermione was somewhat surprised to note that the meeting was at Il Duomo de Firenze, the mother church of the Archdiocese of Florence and one of the most famous cathedrals in the world. She was even more surprised when Blaise finally revealed the identity of his tutor.

"His name is Monsignor Guiseppe Lucardi. Among his other duties, he is a Chaplain of His Holiness, a Deacon in the Order of St. Simon Magus, and the highest ranking spiritual and temporal representative of the Catholic Church among Florence's Catholic wizards and witches. He oversaw my confirmation when I was 7 and began instructing me in Occlumency one week later." He paused at Hermione's expression. "Is that a problem?"

"No, no. I was just ... caught off guard. I remember us discussing the existence of wizards and witches who were still staunchly Catholic last Fall, but I hadn't really thought about it since then. I'm ... not particularly religious, but I promise I'll be respectful."

Blaise smiled. "I appreciate that. And to be honest, I don't consider myself particularly religious either. I reckon there's a much higher percentage of 'Cafeteria Catholics' among wizards than Muggles. After all, we can actually perform our *own* miracles."

Soon, the two were inside the cathedral and sitting comfortably in Monsignor Lucardi's private chambers. To Hermione's amazement, said quarters were only a small part of a sizeable complex full of wizards and witches dressed in priestly cassocks and nuns' habits, all of which somehow fit inside a small broom closet on the cathedral's second floor. The Monsignor, who gave every appearance of being a kindly village priest even though he was obviously an official nearly on par with the British Minister of Magic

in importance, welcomed Hermione and Blaise and escorted them both to a sitting room. An house elf in tiny monks' robes soon appeared bearing the afternoon's *merende*: a platter of Nutella sandwiches and some Italian creme sodas, plus a cappuccino for the priest – the Italian answer to British tea time).

"I am pleased, *Signorina* Granger, that you have already availed yourself of the Italian Language potion. I myself took the English potion many years ago, but it turned out to be the *American* English potion, and I am informed that I speak English with an alarmingly thick Texas drawl. If young Blaise has not yet informed you, your Italian carries a slight but charming Venetian accent."

Hermione chuckled. "Thank you, Monsignor. I have noticed though that I still hear some words as Italian rather than English, such as *Signorina* just now. Why is that?"

"A quirk of the potion, my dear. Certain random Italian words you already understood prior to taking the potion still sound Italian. *Signorina*. *Buongiorno*. *Rigatoni*. Etc. But enough of our idle chit-chat. You have finished your *merende* and I have but an hour before I must return to my duties. Blaise wishes me to examine your Occlumency and give you advice on how to proceed."

Hermione nodded as the priest produced a wand from the sleeve of his cassock which he then pointed at the young girl.

**"*LEGILIMENS*."**

Blaise sat quietly and looked back and forth between his friend and mentor. Hermione furrowed her brow in concentration as she sought to detect the older man's psychic intrusion and then expel him. Lucardi's own



expression was placid and gave no sign as to whether he was experiencing any difficulties or even whether he was doing anything at all. Finally, after a long thirty seconds, he looked away. Hermione slumped a bit in her chair and took a deep breath.

"You did quite well, my child. You are on the way to developing rudimentary Occlumency shields, though the process will take many months to perfect as I'm sure you know." The Monsignor hesitated. "Tell me, *Signorina* Granger. What is your purpose in studying this art? Do you wish to truly master the powers of Occlumency? Or simply protect your secrets from prying minds?"

Hermione hesitated. "Honestly, the latter. I've ... had the experience of losing my secrets and those of my friends to someone with Leglimency. Those friends and I nearly died as a result. I don't wish that to happen again if I can avoid it. But as for the higher powers of Occlumency? If possible, I would like to wait until I am older and more mature before tampering with my own emotions. I've ... heard stories of how badly that can turn out for some people."

Lucardi took a slow sip of his cappuccino.

"*Signorina* Granger, I wish to try something. But before I do, I must ask for your consent. From my brief intrusion into your mind, I suspect that you may have a somewhat rare and valuable gift. But the process for confirming and developing that gift is ... well, somewhat painful. I assure you that it will cause no lasting harm beyond a headache which can be alleviated with a healing potion. Will you consent to my investigation?"

Hermione glanced at Blaise who simply shrugged, then she turned back to Lucardi. "Yes sir. Please proceed."

Lucardi nodded and then called for a house elf who he referred to respectfully as Brother Lolo. He politely asked the robed elf to fetch a Headache Curing Potion which the elf quickly procured. Then, Lucardi raised his wand again and looked into Hermione's eyes once more. This time, he narrowed his eyes and spoke more forcefully, almost angrily in fact. "**LEGILIMENS!**" Immediately, Hermione tensed and gritted her teeth. It was a struggle to maintain eye contact, and after about ten seconds, she finally cried out in anguish. Immediately, the priest released his spell and then quickly handed the potion over to the shaking girl who took it gratefully.

"My apologies, *Signorina*, for your pain. *But* it was worthwhile. I am pleased to inform you that you have the potential for natural Occlumency shields which can be developed very quickly, albeit through an unpleasant and painful process."

"Wait," interrupted Blaise. "Hermione is a natural Occlumens? But I've been helping her, and she hasn't been advancing any further than I did when I started out."

"Not a natural *Occlumens*, my boy. That is a *truly* a rare blessing. Not one wizard in 10,000 gains the full benefits of Occlumency without considerable training, a rarity on par with being a natural Legilimens or a Metamorphmagus or a born Animagus. Natural Occlumency *shields*, however, are far more common and are found in approximately one out of every twelve wizards or witches. These shields are dormant until triggered in response to pain-inducing Legilimency, but once active, they will detect and defend against even the most subtle forms of that art."

He turned his attention back to Hermione. "In your case, *Signorina* Granger, after just a few seconds of

exposure to an intentionally painful Legilimency attack, I could sense rudimentary shields beginning to fall into place. If you wish to avail yourself of this admittedly painful technique, I believe that by the end of the Summer, if not sooner, you can acquire defensive shields comparable to those of a third-level Occlumens, though you would not, of course, gain any of the other, more sophisticated benefits of Occlumency until you make a formal study of the art."

Even as she massaged her temples while the pain receded, Hermione seemed excited. "But that would be wonderful! I'd be happy to wait until I'm older to become an Occlumens, assuming I ever did, if I could just gain the protective benefits now."

Lucardi smiled. "Then it is settled. Blaise has informed me that you will be in Florence for three weeks. You will meet with me three times a week during your time here for one hour during each session. And I must warn you, *Signorina* Granger – you will be taking a great many Headache Relieving Potions in the coming weeks."

Hermione gulped ... and then nodded affirmatively.

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After another twenty minutes of painful Legilimency invasion – and two more pain relief potions – Hermione and Blaise left the cathedral and joined Gunther in the Countess's Bentley. They would be meeting the Grangers and the Countess for a bit of sightseeing followed by dinner at one of Florence's most fashionable restaurants.

As the Bentley pulled out onto the busy Florentine streets, a black SUV which had been parked further down the street slowly pulled out to follow it.

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**7 July 1993**  
**4:00 p.m.**

It was a late afternoon, and Blaise and Hermione were together in a small study in the east wing work on their Charms homework. Presently, they were working on a Third Year conjuration Charm that theoretically would create a small cloud of colorful butterflies. Thus far, Blaise had only managed a "flock" of caterpillars that would materialize in mid-air and then drop to the table with an audible splat. Undaunted, Hermione checked the wand movements depicted in their textbook and then waved her wand in the air.

"**MARIPOSUS.**" There was a flash of light from the tip of Hermione's wand, followed by a stream of twenty or so brilliant multicolored butterflies which fluttered around the room at her direction. Hermione's eyes shone as she watched the display. Blaise was equally entranced, his brief and tiny surge of jealousy over Hermione's success forgotten. Then, they were both surprised by a gasp from behind them.

"Wow," said Dan Granger with an excited grin on his face. Startled, Hermione lost her concentration, and the butterflies instantly faded from view. "Oh, I'm sorry," Dan said disappointedly. "Was that my fault?"

"It's okay, Dad. You just startled me. Let me try again." Hermione waved her wand and spoke the incantation once more. Blaise started to interrupt, but he was surprised when the stream of butterflies appeared once more. Dan laughed in appreciation. Then, from further down the hall, another voice called out.

"Dan? Where did you get off to?" It was Emma Granger.

"In here, Em!" he called out excitedly without taking his eyes off the gleaming butterflies. Then, he glanced over to Blaise with a hint of embarrassment. "Sorry. It's just ... we haven't really had a chance to see Hermione do any magic since before she first went to Hogwarts."

At that second, Emma Granger followed her husband into the room. Instantly, the butterflies popped out of existence. Surprised, Hermione tried the Charm again but nothing happened.

"It's the Italian Trace," said Blaise. "You can't cast spells with your wand while directly observed by Muggles."

"I'm a Muggle," said Dan in confusion. "Her spell worked fine in front of me."

"Apparently, Dr. Granger – Mr. Dr. Granger, that is – you must actually be a squib."

"I beg your pardon," the man replied in confusion. Hermione sighed softly.

"A squib is the term used for someone without magic but who is descended from a wizarding family. On your side, we're descended from the Dagworth-Grangers, who are a somewhat prominent family of British wizards."

"Really?" he said excitedly. "We should write to them and let them know."

"I already have, Dad," Hermione said while looking down at the table. "They're, um ..."

"They're bigots, sir," Blaise interrupted. "Or at least their Head of House is. In a lot of Pureblooded families, especially in Britain, it is considered a mark of extreme shame to

produce squib offspring, and most families cut ties." The boy hesitated. "Literally so, in some families."

"Oh," said Dan as he absorbed what the boy had implied. "Well then, what does it mean that I'm a squib other than a family connection that doesn't seem to matter?"

"Well," said Blaise thoughtfully. "First of all, you don't count as a Muggle for things like Muggle-Repelling Charms or the Italian version of the Trace, so you can watch Hermione do magic while you're here. Back home you could visit Hogwarts or Hogsmeade with no trouble. You can drink magical potions that either would do nothing to a Muggle or perhaps even be harmful. If you have *enough* latent magic, you can activate and use enchanted objects like brooms, though it would be unusual to see that in a squib several generations removed from the last wizarding ancestor." He smiled. "And anyway, I would not recommend asking Hermione to teach you to ride a broom. She's not a fan."

Hermione sniffed disdainfully. Her views on flying broomsticks were well-known among her friends.

"So," said Emma in an odd voice. "Dan can watch Hermione do magic, but if I'm here it will just mess things up?"

"Emma," Dan began.

"No, no," she interrupted. "It's okay. I'll leave you to it. See you at dinner." Then, she turned and quickly left the room.

"I, um, I'd probably better go after her," said Dan sheepishly before leaving himself. Hermione watched them go with a sad expression.

"You okay?" Blaise said.

"Yes. No. I don't know." She turned to him. "There are times, Blaise, when I envy Purebloods. You've grown up in this world, and I suppose everyone one you care about is a part of it. I feel like I'm drifting away from my parents, and I don't see what I can do to stop it. And part of me isn't sure if I should even try."

Blaise said nothing and simply returned to his notes.

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**9 July 1993**  
**3:30 a.m.**

Hermione shot up in her bed gasping for air as if she'd awoken from a terrible nightmare. She whispered the word *Lumos* and in response the bedside lamp came on, softly illuminating her room. She studied the bedroom for several seconds as if to remind herself of where she was. Then, she rose and went to the en suite bathroom to splash some cold water on her face. She looked up at her reflection in the mirror and stared at it silently for a long time.

Then, the witch returned to the bedroom and sat down at her writing desk. Pulling out a notebook and pen, she turned to a clean page and made a "to do" list for herself. Once complete, she opened her Charms textbook and began taking notes.

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**9 July 1993**  
**2:00 p.m.**  
**The office of Monsignor Lucardi**

"**LEGILIMENS!**" the Monsignor barked out angrily as if to intimidate Hermione into losing focus. If that was his aim, it was unsuccessful, as the girl simply stared back at him

almost serenely. After several seconds, Lucardi broke contact and sat back in his chair in surprise.

"My sincerest congratulations, *Signorina*. Your Occlumency shields now appear fully formed. I do not believe I could penetrate your thoughts with anything less than a sustained assault over the course of several hours, and even that might not be enough. Well done!"

"That's it?" Blaise practically spluttered. "But Monsignor, it's been barely two weeks. I thought you said that it would take a few *months* for Hermione to develop shields."

"I did," the man replied evenly. "But this is an imprecise process, my son. Remember, *Signorina* Granger did not develop these shields through conscious effort but rather as an autonomic response brought on by physical pain. That she did so this quickly is remarkable but still within the scope of what is possible for those blessed with her aptitude. Indeed, there have been a few reported cases of wizards developing these defensive shields after but a single Legilimency attack."

Blaise nodded somewhat dubiously, while Hermione was relaxed and confident, as if her success had never been in doubt. Later, however, as Gunther was driving the pair back to the villa, the witch suddenly seemed pensive. Blaise studied his friend carefully and with a hint of suspicion.

"What?" Hermione finally asked.

"What do you mean '*what*'?" the boy replied.

"You've been staring at me for several minutes now."

"Sorry. But you seem tense for some reason. I'd have thought you'd be happy about mastering Occlumency so



quickly."

She huffed. "Blaise, I haven't *mastered* Occlumency. I just have very good natural shields. My Occlumency is nowhere near as good as yours and probably never will be. Anyway, not to change the subject, but I think we should put a support group together to help Theo deal with any problems that arise from all that Ultimate Sanction nonsense. I've decided that punishing a child by mind-controlling half the country into hating him is horrible, and I'm going to do something about it."

Blaise actually did a double-take. "A ... support group? What?" he sputtered. "Okay, first of all, you actually did just completely change the subject. It wasn't even subtle. And second, what are you talking about with a *support group*?! I told you we would need to be discreet about helping Theo!"

"No, *you* need to be discreet because you're in Slytherin House and that's how your house operates. '*Gryffindors Charge In*,' as they say."

"Hermione," Blaise said, "the people who say that *don't* mean it as a compliment."

"Perhaps, but that doesn't mean I can't embrace the stereotype. Now I'm thinking of getting all the Muggleborns together for a start and then sounding out Halfbloods who were Muggle-raised. Would you be willing to help me put a list together even if you don't want to be on it officially? Also, we'll need a name for our organization. What do you think we should call ourselves? The Society for the Prevention of Abusive Magic? No wait. The acronym for that is SPAM. That would just be silly."

Blaise simply gaped at the girl, his mouth opening and closing without any sound coming out. Hermione simply

smiled at him and then glanced out the rear window, her smile fading as she did. After a few seconds, she turned back around and knocked on the window separating the driver and the rear of the car. Gunther rolled the window down.

"Yes, Miss 'Ermione?"

"Gunther, I couldn't help but notice that there's a black SUV following us. Unless I'm mistaken, this is the third time we've been followed by the same SUV. Is it something we should be worried about?"

Gunther checked his rearview mirror. "Yes, Miss. I t'ink it might just be. Hold on." Suddenly Hermione and Blaise were flung about in their seats as the Bentley sped up and then abruptly swerved left down a side alley. Seconds later, there was a flash of light next to the car and some trash cans exploded. Blaise cursed loudly.

"That was spellfire! Who's shooting at us?!"

"I reckon it's the Black Hand, Mister B!" Gunther exclaimed. "I told the Countess we shoulda gone to Greece instead!" He began to swerve in an effort to avoid the incoming spellfire. "Both of ya get down!"

Hermione grabbed Blaise and yanked him down to the seat. Barely a second later, a spell hit the rear window and shattered it, causing shards of glass to drop down onto the pair. Instantly, Blaise popped back up and tried to cast a blasting spell at the pursuing vehicle. Nothing happened. Blaise's eyes widened in shock.

"They've got Muggles with them! We can't use magic to defend ourselves!" Then, he felt a jerk as Hermione grabbed him by the collar of his shirt again and pulled him

back down before another spell came through the broken window. The sound of spellfire was soon joined by another equally unwanted sound: gunfire.

"What's the Black Hand and why are they after us?!"  
Hermione yelled over the noise.

"Now is not the time, Hermione!" Blaise yelled back.

"Can you guarantee we'll have another?!"

He grimaced angrily at his friend. "Okay, fine. To greatly oversimplify things ... the Black hand is, well, the Wizarding Mafia."

Hermione fixed him with a disapproving glare. "*Of course* it is! How silly of me not to have expected it on my very first trip to Italy! And why is the Wizarding Mafia after us?"

"Just me. And it's not the whole Black Hand, just the Montessi family."

"DUCK!" Gunther bellowed. Then, he somehow twisted almost his entire body around (without letting go of the wheel or taking his foot off the gas) to fire off an automatic pistol over the two children's heads and out the back window towards the pursuers. Hermione gave out a startled squeal while Blaise cupped his hands over his ears to block out the noise.

"Crap," Gunther muttered while turning back to face the front. "Bulletproof windows. Probably magic." Then, he accelerated, and the Bentley careened through the back streets of Florence, knocking crates and trash cans aside wildly as it went.

"So what do these Montessi people want with you?!" Hermione asked, refusing to let go of her questions.

Blaise huffed. "Salvatore Montessi was my mother's fourth husband and also the *capo di tutti capi* of the Florentine Black Hand! And because of the circumstances and timing of his completely natural and non-suspicious death, I'm set to inherit his position in the organization ... *if* I make it alive to the age of twenty-five! Something all my Montessi cousins would rather not see happen!"

Hermione stared at her friend. "You're literally the only Italian wizard I know! And you're mob-connected! And you complain about *me* fulfilling stereotypes?!"

Before Blaise could respond, there was another blast of spellfire that blew out one of the rear tires. With a snarl, Gunther swerved hard, and the Bentley twisted around so that it came to a rest with the driver's side of the car facing away from the pursuers. Then, he yelled back to his two charges while putting a fresh clip into his gun.

"Get out on my side and run!" he bellowed. "Keep your heads down! I'll cover you as long as I can!" Then, he jumped out and crouched behind the front of the car before opening fire on the pursuers while Blaise and Hermione darted out of the back and ran down the street. Behind them, they heard an exchange of gunfire followed by a yell of pain from Gunther. The two students glanced back in time to see the driver stagger back with blood pouring from bullet holes in his chest and from a thick gash in his neck. Then, Gunther Hagrid fell to the ground, seemingly lifeless.

"GUNTHER!" Blaise screamed, but then Hermione grabbed him by the arm and started pulling.

"Come on! We've got to get away from here!"

The two ran down the street as fast as they could, certain that bullets and curses would soon be following. Half a block down was a small church they chose as a sanctuary and hiding place. Unfortunately, the doors were locked. Hermione looked around wildly. The Montessi killers had not yet made it down the alleyway and the street was otherwise empty of witnesses. "**ALOHOMORA**," she whispered urgently, and the doors opened. Once they were inside, they found the church to be deserted on a Friday afternoon.

"We should split up," Blaise said breathlessly. "It's me they're after."

"Good idea," Hermione said before turning and running up a nearby set of stairs. Blaise stared after her open-mouthed in surprise.

"So much for Gryffindor courage, I guess," he muttered to himself.

Then, he ran towards a door leading to the back of the church. But before he could reach it, he heard an angry voice call out "**COLLOPORTUS**" and the door slammed shut and locked itself. He turned around just in time to be hit with an Expelliarmus, and his wand flew from his pocket into the waiting hand of his chief pursuer. There were three in all. The lead figure he knew well – Enrico Montessi, Salvatore's oldest nephew who Blaise knew to be a wizard. The other two held guns instead of wands, instantly marking them as Muggles. Blaise raised his head defiantly.

"Hello, Cousin Enrico. How have you been?" he said condescendingly.

"Much better now that I have renewed our acquaintance, *bastardo*, for the few minutes left to it."

"You think you can kill the Don's heir and just carry on as usual, Enrico? The other families don't care for assassination of their peers. More importantly, *Zabinis never forget or forgive.*"

"I'll take my chances, boy. Though you'll actually die at the hands of my Muggle friends here." Montessi sneered. "You don't *deserve* the honor of dying by a wand." He gestured and the two thugs stepped forward and pointed their guns at the boy. As one, they pulled their triggers.

*Click.*

The two men looked puzzled and then shook their guns, both of which seemed to have misfired at once. Meanwhile, upstairs in a balcony, hidden behind a chair, Hermione Granger kept her wand pointed at the men while softly but urgently whispering an incantation - "**MERGIT FLAMMARUM**"- over and over again. When the guns failed, Enrico Montessi snarled and held his own wand aloft.

"**HOMENUM REVELIO!**" he cried, and a pulse of magical energy shot from his wandtip in every direction. When it struck the concealed witch, there was a flash of light from her position and an audible "ding." Montessi looked up to the balcony and lashed out with a Blasting Curse which Hermione only barely dodged.

But before he could fire again, a blast of a different sort struck the church. The stained glass windows nearest Montessi and his men exploded inwards as a bloody but unbowed Gunther Hagrid crashed through to land on the floor near them. His shirt was ragged and bloodstained, but the exposed skin showed no signs of the bullet wounds he had taken. Gunther rushed forward and punched the nearest attacker in the side of the head so hard that the

man's jaw shattered with an audible crack. The thug went down instantly. The other gunman ran forward and struck Gunther across the head with his useless weapon. It had absolutely no effect beyond annoying the Gunther who responded by backhanding the shocked Muggle with such force that he flew across the room and into the wall. The assassin hit so hard that a large hunk of plaster from the wall fell to the ground with him, and like his compatriot, the Muggle didn't get back up.

Now alone, Enrico aimed his wand at the towering man. "**LACERO!**" A red wave of cutting force struck Gunther on his chest with enough force to kill a lesser man. After staggering back a step, though, Gunther just snarled and advanced, his gaping wound quickly closing up as he moved. Now truly frightened, Enrico tried to use the Killing Curse, but just as he stammered out the incantation, Gunther grabbed him by his wrist and jerked his arm straight up. The green light of the Killing Curse shot harmlessly into the ceiling.

Gunther growled again. Then, he opened his mouth ... and *kept opening it* until his jaws were more than six inches apart revealing jagged rocky teeth inside. Enrico started babbling in fear as Gunther forced the man's wand *and his whole hand* into the driver's gaping mouth.

**CHOMP!**

Enrico Montessi screamed and dropped to the ground while clutching the bleeding stump where his wand hand used to be. Gunther took a step back and began chewing ... loudly. After a few seconds, he spat out several pieces of broken wood.

"Elm and ... *unicorn hair*!" Gunther said as he wiped Montessi's blood from his face. "Interestin' choice, Ricky."

Blaise ran over to recover his wand and then joined Gunther. If he had any concerns about what the big man had done, they didn't show. Instead, all of his attention was on Enrico.

"Go back to your family, Montessi. Tell all of your kin that House Zabini has taken your wand and the hand that held it. Tell them *that* is full extent of our mercy. Come after me again and my family will scourge you from the Italian peninsula."

With that threat, Blaise and Gunther turned towards the door only to see a pale and shaking Hermione waiting for them. Her attention was on Gunther, whose face had returned to its normal dimensions but who was now liberally coated with his enemy's blood.

"Are you okay, Hermione?" Blaise said with concern.

"I'm fine. I'm alright. It's just ..." She looked up at Gunther and reflexively shuddered. "I'm sorry. I didn't ... I wasn't expecting ... all that."

Gunther smiled wanly. "It's okay, little miss. No one ever does."

She nodded and the trio quickly left the church.

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### ***Later at the Villa Zabini...***

Hermione and Blaise sat at a small table in the sun room. Gunther had washed his hands and face of blood as best he could, and then he brought two glasses of milk (to which a



shot of Amaretto had been added) to fortify the two children. The trio had commandeered Montessi's SUV to get back to the villa, and along the way, Hermione had explained in response to Blaise's questions that she had hidden herself in the balcony so that she could use magic without the Muggles seeing her and thus neutralizing her wand. Specifically, she had prevented their assailants' guns from working through an innovative use of the Fire Suppression Charm, which temporarily prevented all forms of combustion including the discharge of firearms. Other than that, the girl was subdued. While Hermione had maintained great poise in the face of wizards and Mafiosi trying to murder her friend, it seemed watching Gunther Hagrid bite a man's hand off was a bridge too far.

"Well, then. If'n you two 'er okay, I needs to change me shirt. I've got to pick up the Countess and yuir Mum and Da' before too long, and I can't look all..." He glanced down at his blood-drenched shirt which looked as if he'd worn it to an abbatoir. Then, he nodded to Hermione and left the sun room. Hermione took a sip of her fortified milk. Her hands were shaking.

"Are you okay?" Blaise asked again. "Your kind of worrying me. For someone with natural Occlumency shields, you seem ... highly emotional right now."

Her eyes darted to his. "Blaise, I don't have the emotional control powers that you and Harry do. Maybe no one can read my mind and discover what I've seen today, but that doesn't make it any less... traumatic." She leaned forward onto the table.

"I mean, seriously, when you said you had secrets that you didn't want to share, I was thinking about '*who you might have a crush on*' or '*why are you so absurdly good-*

*looking'* or ..." She paused and blushed as she realized what she'd just said. Blaise's own eyes widened in surprise, and he smiled despite himself. Then, Hermione shook her head and forged onward. "But I *was not* expecting you to be the secret Godfather-in-training of the Wizarding Mafia. Nor was I expecting to find out that your butler is ... whatever your butler is!"

"Gunther's both a servant and a friend," Blaise replied in a calming voice. "He's nothing for you to be afraid of."

"HE BIT OFF A GUY'S HAND!" Hermione shrieked before clapping her hand over her mouth. Blaise rubbed his eyes tiredly. The two sat quietly for a minute or so. Then, Gunther returned, still buttoning up his clean shirt. He coughed diplomatically.

"I'm heading out. Um, Mr. B? If'n you think it would help and you trust the young miss ta keep it a secret, I wouldn't mind if'n you told 'er about ... well, about me." He glanced at Hermione and blushed slightly as if embarrassed over his own existence. Then, he quietly left. Hermione looked over to Blaise expectantly. The boy sighed deeply.

"Okay, here it is. Gunther is half-troll. That gives him enhanced strength, incredible levels of regeneration, and, well, the ability to eat nearly anything he can fit into his exceptionally wide mouth. Needless to say, that makes him an excellent bodyguard as you saw today."

Hermione stared at him for a full three seconds.

"Half... troll?"

"Half-troll."

She stared some more. "And he's the cousin of Rubeus Hagrid from Hogwarts, who is half-giant."

"Yes," he replied while taking another sip of milk.

She stared even longer. "So there were two brothers named Hagrid and one married a giant and the other married a troll?"

Blaise actually laughed at that. "No, Hermione, marriage never entered into it. Come on now. You're an educated young Muggleborn. I assume you had some form of sex education, right?"

The witch nodded. "My last year of Muggle schooling had a health unit that explained the basics."

"Okay, then. Consider the following facts. The average adult male wizard is around six feet tall. The average female giant is between forty and seventy feet tall. Given that disparity, how exactly do you think that sexual reproduction between the two species could possibly work?"

The question astonished her. In the nearly two years that Hermione had known that Hagrid was a half-giant, she'd never considered the matter. "With ... difficulty?"

Blaise laughed again. "Bit of an understatement there. Gunther and his cousin Rubeus, like their ... broodmates, I suppose, were not the product of mixed-species relationships but rather of illicit magical cross-breeding experiments. In the 1920's, there was a dark witch – a would-be Dark Lady, in fact – who called herself Lady Echidna. Her big plan was to create an army of human-creature hybrids that were compelled to obey her will. She was brought to justice fairly quickly by an ICW taskforce and is famous today mainly for her connection to the dark

wizard who served as her lieutenant before he abandoned her when the ICW showed up: Gellert Grindelwald."

Hermione gasped at the mention of Voldemort's sole rival for the title of "Worst Dark Lord of the 20th Century."

"So *that* was why Armando Dippet hated Hagrid so much. It wasn't just bigotry against a human-giant hybrid. He believed that Hagrid's very birth was the result of dark magic."

"Which, to be fair, it was. The process involved vivisecting live wizards and creatures, combining their essences, and then incubating the results in highly illegal and very disgusting potions for nine months. But Hagrid himself is a good person despite his origins, if hopelessly naive and ignorant of his origins. His adopted father lied to him and told him his 'mum' had left their family to return to the giant colonies, and he still believes it. And Gunther is a good person too. Most of Echidna's creations were literal monsters, misshapen horrors that lacked sentience or, worse, were self-aware but violently insane, and those were all put down. Only a few were allowed to live. Gunther and Rubeus were adopted by the Hagrid brothers, a pair of ICW hit wizards who retired to Britain after Echidna was brought down. They both felt that they had an obligation to raise the two infants who could sort of pass for human even if they really weren't. Dumbledore was also part of the taskforce, and he arranged it for them. There was also a half-veela who was adopted into the Delacour family in France. She eventually married one of the sons of the Delacour family, and today they have a daughter at Beauxbatons who's only a few years older than us. There was another half-giant who was exceptionally skilled at magic and, somewhat amazingly, is currently the headmistress at Beauxbatons. I guess the French are more

open-minded about the whole thing than the British. I think there were a few other half-breeds, but I don't know any details about them if they even survived until today."

Hermione stiffened at Blaise's implication that Wizarding Britain might be more bigoted than Wizarding France ... and then slumped as she realized it was perfectly true.

"You know, I'd honestly hoped that the wizarding world was ... *better* than the Muggle world. But it's not, is it. You have bigotry. You have corruption. You have unethical experiments straight out of the Josef Mengele playbook. You even have organized crime. You're just like us except that magic gives you the potential to be awful in new and innovative ways."

Blaise rolled his eyes. "I don't really understand this *you* and *us* business, Hermione. You're a witch. The wizarding world is your world now as much as mine, warts and all."

"Is it really, Blaise? I'm a witch, but also a Muggleborn. And no one is ever going to let me forget it. Harry may have put a muzzle on Draco Malfoy, but I still hear Pansy Parkinson and Cassius Warrington whisper *Mudblood* whenever I get too near. Sitting here in the stately Villa Zabini with your house elves and your half-troll manservant and all the secrets you have that led you to become an Occlumens before you were out of short pants ... I'm sorry, Blaise, but you can't possibly know what it's like to be a Muggleborn."

With that, she rose slowly from the table (for Hermione was suddenly quite tired) and walked out of the sun room. Blaise stared down into the cup of fortified milk in front of him. He took a deep breath.

"I *am* a Muggleborn," he said calmly but firmly. After about five seconds, Hermione poked her head back into the room.

"... *what?!*"

He looked up at her with a sad smile. "I. Am. A. Muggleborn. My birthname was Christian Nembiko. My birth-father was Mosi Nembiko, a Muggle from Kenya who came to Britain to study medicine. My birth-mother was Sabrina Zabini, who was my adoptive mother's youngest sister and also a squib. Unlike most Pureblood families, however, the Zabinis don't throw their squibs out into the cold. They maintained ties with Sabrina and ensured that she was taken care of financially and had an excellent education. Like my father, she decided to become a doctor. They met at university, fell in love, and got married. They both completed medical degrees but instead of going to hospitals or some fancy private practice, they decided to open up a small clinic for underserved immigrants in Brixton. Sabrina had a sizeable stipend from the Zabini family that covered their living expenses, and they were both happy to essentially provide medical services at cost."

He paused suddenly and then swallowed almost painfully. "They were both murdered when I was six."

Hermione gasped. "Death Eaters? Or some wizards who had a vendetta against House Zabini?"

Blaise snorted softly. "Honestly, Hermione," he said with a trace of bitterness. "You just complained that the wizarding world was no better than the Muggle world. Well, the reverse is equally true. My mother was white, my father was black, and we lived in Brixton in the early 1980's. Do the math."

Hermione looked away and then closed her eyes. She had been too young to understand such things at the time, but she was indeed very well-read for a girl of her age. The London suburb of Brixton, with its large immigrant community, had been a hotbed for racial violence throughout that time period and even to the present day.

Blaise saw that she understood. "At some point, a group of skinheads found out that a *miscegenated* couple was providing free medical care to all the *darkies* down in Brixton Town, and they firebombed the flat we lived in. My father tried to get through the flames to reach help but he didn't make it. My mother and I were trapped upstairs with no way out."

He blinked, and suddenly his eyes glistened as he remembered that night. "Then, my mum kissed me on the forehead and took off the charm bracelet she'd worn for as long as I remembered. It was gold and had a small sparrow charm on it. She put it in my hand and told me to say '*Passeroto*,' which was Italian for Little Sparrow. That was my ... my Aunt Serena's pet name for my birth mother ... and now for me. It was also the password for the Portkey in the charm."

He inhaled deeply. "It was a miracle that it worked. Usually, only first generation squibs have enough magic to activate something as powerful as a Portkey. Maybe my mother had seen some signs of accidental magic that I don't remember. Maybe she just prayed. But either way, I turned out to be a wizard, and the Portkey carried me to the home of Lady Serena Zabini, my aunt who became my mother. I never saw my birth parents again outside of old photos."

"And she changed your name so that no one would know of your true Muggleborn nature," Hermione guessed in a soft

voice.

He nodded. "The Zabinis may look after our squibs better than most, but we're still an old Pureblood family. The circles we travel in would have looked down on me for being Muggleborn, so she fashioned a new identify for me as her lovechild with a Pureblood wizard who had since died. She'd actually had a child born the same year as me, a girl named Blaise. That child died before the age of two, so she bribed the right people to alter the birth certificate so that it would be evidence for my Pureblood ancestry."

Blaise looked over to his friend with an amused expression. "So you wanted to know all my secrets, Hermione. I'm a Muggleborn pretender with a half-troll bodyguard and mortal enemies in the Black Hand, the crime syndicate I will hopefully one day inherit. Satisfied for now?"

She chuckled. "Oh, I don't know. Do you have any other secrets that will shock me to the core when I eventually find them out?"

Blaise said nothing at first. He thought briefly about the tiny amulet under his shirt hanging from a rosary, the one that bore the insignia of the Deathly Hallows and that not even his mentor and confessor, Monsignor Lucardi, knew about. But even if he was ready to tell Hermione about that, it was not his secret to share. He took another sip from his milk and savored the aftertaste of the Amaretto liqueur that had been added.

"Well, I've started noticing girls, if that counts," he finally said in a languid voice.

Hermione shook her head. "Nope. You're thirteen. That's not the least bit shocking."



Blaise took another longer sip. "And also boys," he added lightly almost as an afterthought.

The other Muggleborn studied her friend for a few seconds before breaking out into a smile. "Still not shocking," she said as she pulled him into a friendly hug which he returned.

"What about you?" the boy inquired. "Any dark and sinister secrets you want to share?"

"Sorry. No big secrets for me. I'm a Gryffindor. We're all as transparent as glass."

Blaise laughed in agreement. Then, they heard a door open in the front of the house and went to investigate. It was Gunther returning with the Grangers and the Countess. Hermione looked over at her friend and thought about what it must have felt like to lose one's parents, not by them gradually pulling apart, but through terrible violence. Then, she rushed forward and pulled her mother and then her father into a hug.

"Hermione, dear," said a surprised Emma. "What's wrong?"

The witch looked up at her parents, one a Muggle and the other a squib (just like Blaise's parents), and she smiled.

"Nothing's wrong, Mum. I just realized I haven't spent any time with my parents on this vacation, and it's time I did something about that. I've finished ... one of my projects early, so why don't we go off tomorrow and do something together as a family. Something completely and wonderfully Muggle."

Dan looked back and forth between his wife and daughter and gave a laugh. "Sure, sweetheart. Your mother and I will

go change clothes, and then we'll plan out something for tomorrow. Something all three of us can do together."

The three Grangers hugged again. Blaise watched them with a smile, while the Countess did so with a look of detached amusement. Then, Dan and Emma went upstairs. As soon as they were gone, Hermione went over to Gunther, and to the hulking man's surprise, she gave him a strong hug as well.

"Thank you for saving our lives today, Gunther," she whispered in a voice full of affection. Somewhat surprised but also pleased, the half-troll patted the girl gently on the back.

"Any time, little miss. Any time."

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***10 July 1993***

***1:30 a.m.***

Hermione lay in her bed staring at the ceiling. The curtains were open, but the moon was only half-full and its light was dim. She sighed in annoyance and pounded on her pillow, as if hoping that changing its shape would help sleep come. Honestly, it was ridiculous that she should be robbed of sleep over guilt from such a minor sin in the face of all the much larger sins of the world, but there it was. Blaise Zabini - mysterious, duplicitous, manipulative, Slytherinesque Blaise Zabini - had opened himself up to the girl and told her things he'd probably never shared with anyone other than perhaps the Countess and Gunther.

And then, she'd lied in his face. She wondered if her newfound Occlumency protections were what had allowed her to lie so effortlessly.

*"Sorry. No big secrets for me. I'm a Gryffindor. We're all as transparent as glass."*

Liar.

**"LUMOS."** The soft lights in the bedroom came on, and with a huff, Hermione pulled herself out of bed and made her way to the writing desk. She flipped open the notebook into which she'd written a to-do list the night before, and for a long time, she stared at all the tasks she'd set for herself over the course of the coming year. Then, slowly and with deliberate purpose, she drew a long thin line through the first item.

"One down," she muttered to herself.

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***21 DAYS UNTIL AZKABAN***

# Prelude (Jim)

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## Chapter 3: Jim Potter and the Beast of Shamballa (Pt 1)

### ***Somewhere, Sometime...***

*The little boy had been lost in the woods for longer than he could remember, and as the night got colder, he'd ended up huddled under a tree sobbing quietly and shivering both from the cold and from fear. For he knew that there was a monster after him, a great and terrible monster that would devour him whole if it caught him. Then, the boy gasped in terror as a demonic howl erupted from farther into the woods. It was some distance away, but closer than the last time he'd heard it just a few minutes before. The boy began to weep piteously. He was alone and cold and the monster would be here soon. Then, as that thought rippled through his terrified mind, the boy heard another sound much closer. He turned and saw that the bushes just a few feet away were rustling as some thing pushed its way through them. And the distant howl that had so frightened the boy was now replaced by a different animal sound. A low, hungry growl.*

*The bushes parted, and the boy screamed.*

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**2 July 1993**  
**The Patil Estate**  
**Madras, India**

Jim Potter awoke to warm tropical sunlight streaming through the open window of his room accompanied by the faint aroma of jasmine and coriander. He sat up in his canopied bed and for the first real time took a good solid look through the gauzy curtains at the guest room in which he'd been sleeping fitfully for the last day and a half. Like Ron (who was in the room across the hall), Jim had no prior experience with International Portkeys, let alone Portkeys designed for traveling to the literal opposite side of the globe. Accordingly, he and Ron had both been quite sick upon arrival and for most of the next day. Even his mother Lily had suffered a strong reaction, though the effect was far more pronounced on the two boys whose growing magical cores were more sensitive to the experience. Padma and Parvati, having made the trip many times, were smugly immune much to Jim and Ron's chagrin.

The Patil estate was located on a beautiful spot of coastline off the Bay of Bengal situated roughly twenty miles north of Madras, a major Muggle population center. The sands were golden, the waters were azure, and the weather was invariably perfect. The Patils and their guests would spend another day here recuperating from the journey before taking a local (and far less nauseating) Portkey to Delhi and then moving on to Shamballa. The Patil sisters were both somewhat cagey on exactly what "Shamballa" was, leaving Jim and Ron with the impression that it was the Indian equivalent of Diagon Alley, a thought which amused the twin girls for some unknown reason.

Jim inhaled deeply of the fragrances in the air that seemed so different from the familiar scents of the British Isles. As he did, he thought back over his summer so far. He'd been home from Hogwarts for barely a day when Harry and his solicitor unexpectedly came through the Floo to demand a private meeting with James. They'd spent thirty minutes

together in James's private study, a conversation which eventually turned into a shouting match before Harry stormed out again and returned to Longbottom Manor without even acknowledging either his twin or their mother. Soon after, Jim had gotten the truth from James. Theo Nott – or rather Theo No-Name – had been cast out of his house under something called "the Ultimate Sanction" and would soon be an object of scorn and hatred from most of Wizarding Britain.

Somewhat ironically, he would *not* be an object of hatred as far as Jim was concerned. While most everyone associated with any of the Noble Houses would be affected by the Sanction, it would affect neither Hogwarts professors nor aurors ... nor their children. Nevertheless, James firmly encouraged Jim to avoid Theo No-Name, as Jim's reputation had only just recovered from the Heir of Slytherin business, and the family didn't need the controversy that would accompany any association with the outcast boy. Jim gave his father a look of deep disappointment and then left without saying anything more.

After that, Jim had been oddly relieved to be spending most of his Summer Break away from his home and from James Potter. He still loved his father dearly, but, as was often the case for young teenagers, Jim was going through a phase of not *liking* him very much. And so, he wasn't at all bothered by the fact that most of his Summer Break would be spent away from the man, first with a week with Harry at Longbottom Manor followed by a full *month* in Shamballa studying with the Patil sisters' Uncle Gupta. He and Lily were scheduled to return to Potter Manor the day before the Jim Potter Birthday Gala (which was inexplicably being held again despite the *hideous bloodbath* from Jim's *last* birthday party!) and then spend a month there before school started. Hopefully by then, the tension

between Jim and his father would be diminished, which would be good because he was expecting entirely new forms of tension this upcoming year at school due to the Theo No-Name situation. Perhaps most disturbingly, Jim was concerned about conflict with (of all people!) his house-mate Neville Longbottom. As he climbed out of bed and stretched out the kinks of a day and a half of Portkey sickness, Jim thought back to his visit to the Longbottoms and the other boy's unusually intense feelings about Theo No-Name.

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### ***Then ...***

*Jim had arrived at Longbottom Manor by Floo back on June 23 rd just in time for brunch before spending the rest of the day outside. Lady Longbottom had wanted Jim to help Neville improve his broom-handling skills, Neville wanted to spend time in the greenhouse (and to be fair, Jim's own Herbology grades needed work), and Harry just wanted to lounge around the pool and work on his tan that never seemed to darken. It wasn't until that evening that Jim had finally gotten a tour of Longbottom Manor.*

*"Thank you once again for having me, Lady Longbottom," Jim had said over the breakfast table as he reviewed the startling large assortment of jams and jellies produced by Longbottom Farms before finally reaching for the one marked "Peppered Peach and Rosemary."*

*Lady Augusta waved her hand diffidently. "Not at all, my boy. I'm delighted to have you here. My hope is that you and Harry together can help Neville to get over his reticence about broom-riding. It is a valuable skill even outside of Quidditch, and it's high time he mastered it."*

*Jim and Harry laughed at Neville's grimace. He'd known since school ended that Jim would be visiting them at some point during the Summer break, but he had been quite surprised when his grandmother had cornered him the night before to announce that after welcoming the Boy-Who-Lived with a nice brunch, he was to spend the rest of the day outside getting some exercise which would include broom-riding lessons from the best two flyers in his year.*

*After some amiable chit-chat over brunch (Jim noticed that Augusta and Harry both resolutely avoided asking how his parents were doing), the three boys headed upstairs to get their broomsticks. Harry tarried in the rear, and before he left the sunroom, he turned back to Augusta.*

*"How long should I keep him occupied?" he asked quietly.*

*She glanced up at the wall clock which read 11:15. "Until sunset if possible. I'll have a house elf send you a picnic lunch around two o'clock."*

*Harry nodded and followed his friend and his brother upstairs.*

*All things considered, Jim thought his week with Harry was enjoyable with only one hiccup. At one point, Jim mentioned Theo No-Name to ask if Harry knew how the boy was doing, and he was startled by the angry response from Neville to effect that "everybody knows the boy's dark and he probably deserved his punishment, so why do people have to keep talking about it?!" Jim glanced over to Harry with wide eyes, but his twin simply and discreetly shook his head "no." Later, while Neville was engrossed with a particularly difficult plant in the greenhouse, Jim pulled Harry aside and asked about the boy's uncharacteristically harsh reaction.*



*Harry sighed in frustration. "You and I are are basically immune to the Sanction because James is Chief Auror and Lily is a Hogwarts professor, plus we've both had Occlumency training. Neville not only has no Occlumency skill at all, he's also wearing his official Heir's Ring which ties him into the Wizengamot's communal magic network. That actually heightens the reaction. Except for any students who are actual Nott vassals, Neville might be more strongly affected than anyone else at Hogwarts."*

*Jim looked back towards Neville and shuddered. Easily the kindest boy Jim had ever known, Neville Longbottom was now consumed by an obvious disdain towards a former close friend just because of a cruelly abused spell. It was horrifying and made Jim only more eager to get to India and begin his Occlumency training in earnest.*

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### ***Now...***

And that training, hopefully, would begin in the next day or so once the group reached the mysterious Shamballa. Shaking off his misgivings about Theo's situation, Jim dressed quickly for his morning workout before heading across the hall to knock on Ron's door. His friend answered groggily but appropriately dressed.

"Ready for our morning jog? I've never been jogging on a beach before!" Jim said with exaggerated cheerfulness.

Ron gave a sour look. "You know, after all those months when we didn't talk because I was possessed and wanted to kill you, I'd totally forgotten how bloody obnoxious you are in the mornings."

"Lies! You love me like a brother! And don't say '*bloody*.' Hermione wouldn't approve, and I promised to nag you on

her behalf until school starts back up."

Ron snorted and then followed his best friend outside for their morning workout.

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### ***3 July 1993***

The next day, Jim, Ron, Lily, and most of the Patils were waiting out on the front porch of the compound. Parvati, alas, was running late, having changed clothes three times.

"She'll be meeting *Sanjeeeee* on this trip for the first time since we started Hogwarts," Padma said mockingly.

"Padma!" exclaimed Mrs. Patil. "Be nice to your sister! You know how important it is to make a favorable impression on the Pasha's son! It's the first time they've met face to face since she was *seven*!"

Padma nodded respectfully to her mother and then turned back to Jim and Ron, rolling her eyes as she did to make it plain that she had not the slightest concern for impressing the Pasha's son. Soon enough, Pavarti came down and the Patils and their guests all grabbed hold of a long silken cord which was the Portkey to Delhi. With a pop and an instant of uneasiness (one that, mercifully, was nothing compared to the trip from London to Madras), the group was suddenly in an alleyway off of a busy Delhi street. Mr. Patil reassured the group that there was a Muggle-Repelling Charm on that alley to ensure that no one would notice their arrival before leading the group out onto the jam-packed streets of Delhi. Jim and Ron both marveled at how crowded the city was, with people, with vehicles, and even with large animals in the streets. Jim had some experience navigating London with his parents, but that was nothing compared to what he was experiencing now. And poor Ron, who never even

visited the township of Ottery St. Catchpole without the company of his parents, was nearly overwhelmed at the crush of Muggles. At one point, Parvati had to grab him by the arm and yank him out of the way of a passing lorry that didn't even slow down. The girl gave him a pointed look, and he blushed in response.

Ten minutes later, the group entered a small, nondescript office underneath a sign in a language that the boys couldn't read. Once inside, Mr. Patil spoke to a bored-looking official in the local tongue. A thought occurred to Jim, and he leaned over to Padma.

"How big of a problem is it that we don't speak ... Hindi? Sanskrit? Or whatever language it is people speak here?" he asked. The girl simply gave him a knowing smile.

"Not a problem at all, Jim, I assure you."

As if to belie that, the official pulled out a large chunk of topaz bigger than a man's head and a faded notecard. He began reading the card in phonetic English marred by a nearly incomprehensible Indian accent.

*"Weel each of yoo een turn step furward and tooch yoor wand ubon dis stone. Den repeat aftair me. Eye, state yoor name, swear ubon my majick dat I will keep de peace of Shamballa."*

Jim and Ron looked at each other dubiously while the Patils stepped forward and took the brief oath, followed by Lily. Finally, the two boys followed suit. Satisfied, the official opened up a small wooden gate to allow the group to follow him down a corridor. At the end of the hallway was a heavy metal door with a keyhole in the center. The official pulled out a ring of keys, selected one in particular, and inserted it into the lock. As he pulled the heavy door open, Jim was

surprised by a sudden blast of cold air. One by one the group passed through the door to whatever lay beyond. The Patils, who knew what to expect, let the way, followed by the three British visitors, each of whom gasped in amazement.

Beyond the door was an enormous patio-balcony with a polished marble floor. Stunned by the sight, Jim slowly walked forward to the edge of the balcony to take in the view, shaking off the chill as he did. Below him was not a mere alley as he had been expecting. It was *a city*.

Shamballa was a true magical metropolis, easily ten times the size of Diagon Alley in area. But while the tallest building in Diagon Alley was the four-story Gringotts Bank (well, four stories *above* ground, at least), Shamballa was dotted with gleaming towers, many of which were ten stories or more. The skies above the city were teeming with scores upon scores of magic carpets, zeppelin-like airships, and flying chariots drawn by all manner of magical beasts. Then, Lily looked up past the city to the mountain range which rose above it and gasped. While not an expert in geography by any means, she was certainly lettered enough to recognize the summit of Mt. Everest when she saw it.

"We're in the Himalayas!" she exclaimed.

"Indeed," said the magical official amiably and now in what sounded like perfect English. "And now that we are here, please allow me to properly introduce myself. I am Hapranda Suresh, Guardian of the Delhi Portal. On behalf of the city's inhabitants, *Welcome to Shamballa!*"

Jim looked at him in surprise. "Wait, this whole time you actually speak English?"

Suresh laughed. "No, young traveler. I am not speaking English and neither are you. Here in Shamballa, we all

speak *Language!*"

Jim and Ron stared in confusion as Padma explained. "The city of Shamballa was founded over 3,000 years ago by wizards and witches from across Asia, from the Persian Empire to India and China all the way to Japan and Malaysia. Their goal was to establish a truly magical nation separated as completely as possible from the non-magical world. The original city founders included a large number of powerful wizards and witches, all of whom spoke a variety of local languages and dialects. To facilitate their cooperation, the magic that supports the city includes a spell that allows everyone in this valley, regardless of origin, to understand one another. There might be a few idiosyncratic words that sound foreign, but for the most part, while you're here, you aren't speaking English or Hindi or Mandarin or whatever. You're speaking ... Language."

Parvati sighed loudly to her mother. "Padma's in lecture mode again, Mummy. I'm going to freshen up before Sanjeev gets here."

"Sweetheart," said Mr. Patil with a bit of exasperation, "you should have done that before we got here."

"I did, Papa. But then you made us walk for ten minutes through a Delhi slum and now I'm filthy." And without another word, Parvati strolled off imperiously to a nearby door marked with the universal sign for "Ladies' Room," her doting mother in tow.

Jim shook his head and turned back to Suresh. "So I assume that oath we swore has something to do with whatever passes for a Trace over here. How does it work?"

"Much more efficiently than the one you are accustomed to in Britain, young man. You are free to use your magic as you will here in Shamballa, for there are no Muggles to see you. The city itself will watch over you and judge the rightness of your actions. Cast a spell with criminal or malicious intent, and the aurors in the Tower of Justice are immediately notified of your actions and location. Only aurors, healers, and certain high-ranking city officials are capable of apparating within the city's boundaries except at certain specified apparation points, so escape would be very difficult. So long as it harm no others, do as you will is the whole of Shamballa's law, at least where underage magic is concerned."

Both boys were surprised by the news, causing Padma to smirk at them. "So I guess you understand why I come back here every Summer, huh?"

Ron leaned over the balcony railing, still awestruck by the city which looked like something out of an ancient fairy tale. "How many people live here?" he asked.

"About 50,000 permanent residents, of whom 30,000 are wizards and witches and the rest squibs," said Mr. Patil. "Plus another 10,000 people who work here in some capacity or pursue education here but who have homes elsewhere in magical communities ranging from Iran to Japan. Also a few thousand tourists at any given time."

Then, the group's attention was drawn to a truly enormous flying carpet, one big enough to hold a twenty-by-twenty silken tent with room to spare, flew up from the city below to park alongside the balcony. A dashing young teen stepped out of the tent, resplendent in traditional Indian garb with a ceremonial sword at his side and a sash over his chest covered in jewels and medals. While he was good-

looking and brimming with confidence, Ron found something about the newcomer off-putting. For some reason, he reminded Ron of an Indian Draco Malfoy. Somewhat nervously, Mr. Patil stepped forward and bowed respectfully.

"Esteemed Sanjeev, Son of Kumar, you honor us with your presence."

The young man, who was undoubtedly Parvati's future husband, bowed just as deeply and respectfully. "Venerable Elder Patil, on behalf of my father the Pasha, welcome to Shamballa." Then, he turned to Padma. "And my heart is gladdened to finally see my beautiful intended once again after all these years."

Before anyone could intervene, Sanjeev stepped forward, took Padma's hand in his own, and kissed it ... only for the romantic scene to be interrupted by a loud squawk from the nearby ladies' room. It was a shocked and visibly angry Parvati. Sanjeev looked back and forth between the two Patil sisters in confusion.

"Wrong twin," Padma finally said almost blandly.

Sanjeev immediately dropped Padma's hand as if it were poisonous before striding over to the fuming Parvati to make his apologies. Then, as the group boarded Sanjeev's flying carpet, Jim leaned over to Padma.

"You enjoyed that way too much," he whispered. She didn't respond, but the ghost of a smile on her face said everything.

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***That afternoon at the Temple of Wisdom***

As it was deemed socially inappropriate for the Patils to stay at the Pasha's estate so many years in advance of Parvati and Sanjeev's wedding, the Pasha had booked several suites for the group at one of the city's palatial hotels. The travelers' luggage had already been sent ahead, and after everyone had freshened up, Mr. Patil arranged transport for the group to the Temple of Wisdom, an enormous monastery-like building which Padma said served as both Shamballa's answer to Hogwarts and also the city's center for advanced Mastery-level learning. Gupta Baskar apparently split his time between the Temple of Wisdom where he taught apprentice healers and the nearby Temple of Health, where he served as Chief Mind Healer. The man himself was waiting on the front steps of the Temple of Wisdom as the group arrived.

Immediately, Jim took a liking to the man. Though obviously an important figure, Baskar radiated the genial and kindly aura of someone who had devoted his life to the health and peace of others. According to Padma, the healer was well over ninety years old yet looked to be less than half that age. He wore a long white tunic over linen trousers and an open sky-blue robe. A small insignia was woven into the robe's fabric, the international insignia of the magical healer. After taking a few seconds to hug his niece and his two grand-nieces, Baskar bowed respectfully to Jim, Ron, and Lily before shaking each of their hands in turn.

"Welcome to the Temple of Wisdom, my friends. Let us adjourn to my office, where we can discuss your agenda for your time here." At that point, Mr. and Mrs. Patil took their leave, as they had business in the city, and Parvati left with them. Padma, to the boys' surprise, stayed behind, saying that she had her own business here at the Temple of Wisdom before waving her fingers at them and then heading off on her own.



Soon after, the remaining four were seated in Baskar's office enjoying tea and watercress sandwiches. Idly, Lily wondered if Gupta Baskar normally took tea or was simply being solicitous of his British guests. If the man was really over ninety, he very well may have had some unpleasant memories of India's time as a British possession. If so, he gave no sign of it.

"Now then," he began, "I have reviewed the letters you sent me, Mr. Potter, as well as my own observations based on the British newspaper articles which Padma provided. As I see it, your goals for this summer are three-fold. One, for both you and Mr. Weasley to undergo magical healing to address the various psychic traumas you have each experienced in the last year. Two, for you and Mr. Weasley as well to develop functional Occlumency shields able to defend against psychic intrusion. And three, for both of you to begin an exploration of the gift of Parseltongue which each of you seems to have acquired." He took a sip of tea. "*Isss that about the sssize of it?*" he hissed softly in the serpentine language that only Jim and Ron could comprehend. They each nodded silently, both acutely aware of how Lily stiffened nervously in the chair between them.

Baskar crooked an eyebrow. "Please forgive me, Mrs. Potter. It was rude of me to speak in a language you don't speak. Parselmouths who interact regularly with one another often slip into that language without realizing it. This is especially true here in Shamballa, as Parseltongue is the only language not automatically translated by the city's magic, a fact that we Parselmouths often forget."

"It's alright, Healer Baskar," Lily said unconvincingly. "I quite understand."

"I am pleased. Now, I think the next step should be for me to talk to each of you in turn. I will, of course, be bound by the healer's vow of confidentiality, but more than that, I think it important to develop a bond of trust with each of my patients. And also, when it comes to Parseltongue, with each of my students. Mrs. Potter, as the other grown-up in the room, you have the privilege of going first."

At the healer's direction, Ron and Jim stepped out into the waiting area outside Baskar's office while the two adults had a brief discussion. While the two adults were talking, several people came by to speak with the healer's squib receptionist, one of whom caught Jim's eye immediately. It was muscular bald man who wore Eastern-style clothing appropriate to a martial artist and who had a number of scars on his face and his exposed arms. The most intriguing thing about the man, however, was the fact that, other than Ron and Lily, he was the only other person Jim had seen so far in Shamballa whose skin tone marked him as a European rather than Asian. The man brusquely identified himself as Brother Chandra and said that due to unexpected developments, he would be canceling his appointment with the healer scheduled for that afternoon. Then, as he turned to leave, he noticed the two boys and gave Jim what he thought was a surprisingly angry glare before storming out. Jim wondered if he'd ever met the man before, but he didn't look at all familiar.

After fifteen minutes, Lily exited the healer's office bearing a thoughtful expression. Jim's talk lasted longer, about thirty minutes, as did Ron's subsequent meeting. Jim came out surprisingly upbeat. Ron, less so.

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### ***Lily and the Healer***

"Mrs. Potter, in the interests of time and efficiency, I will come straight to the point. As your son's mind healer, it is my strong recommendation that you spend as little time as possible personally observing Jim's treatment and training here at the Temple. Ideally none at all."

Lily blinked in surprise. "Excuse me?! This is my son we're talking about!"

"I am well aware of that. I am also aware though several weeks of research of what it means to be the Boy-Who-Lived. And also by extension, what it means to be the Mother-of-the-Boy-Who-Lived. Without even a formal examination of the boy's psyche, it is obvious that he values your approval highly. Which makes it *a problem* that you cannot bear the sound of Parseltongue spoken aloud without visibly flinching."

The woman fumed at that but couldn't deny the accusation. "I'm sorry, Healer Baskar, but I can't help it. Growing up in the era I did, the sound of Parseltongue to me sounds like ... like the sound of *You-Know-Who himself*."

Baskar blinked twice. "You ... Know... Are you referring to the Dark Lord Voldemort?"

She flinched again. "We ... don't like to say his name."

"Really? How very odd."

She shrugged. "Yes, well, his being one of the worst Dark Lords in history made something of an impact on people."

The healer scoffed gently. "With all due respect, Mrs. Potter. I wouldn't even characterize Voldemort as the worst Dark Lord of *Europe* within the past *century*. Grindelwald was

indubitably worse, and the Dark Lady Echidna might well have been if she hadn't been caught early."

Lily stiffened with just a hint of brewing anger. "Healer Baskar, I *lived* through the War against You-Know-Who. I know first hand what it was like, as does every single resident of Wizarding Britain who survived that era."

"I have no doubt. I merely note, Mrs. Potter, that during that same period, we here in Shamballa were rather more concerned with the Dark Lord Li-Tsien Chang's efforts to claim the mantle of the Fifth Dragon Emperor and with the Malaysian Witch Queen Salanga's schemes to open a portal to the Yomi Realm and unleash an army of undead penanggalan. Not to mention the horrific violence perpetrated by various Muggle military organizations across Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia during that era, violence which not only decimated local Wizarding communities but also unwittingly threatened the integrity of magical seals which had been containing ancient horrors since before the time of Merlin."

He took a sip of tea. "Britain is not the World, Mrs. Potter," he finally said. Caught off guard by his remarks, Lily said nothing, and after a moment, Baskar continued.

"But enough of ancient history. Let us return to the matter at hand. As one of the world's foremost experts on Parseltongue, I can assure you that it's not *just* fear of ... You-Know-Who that causes your reaction, Mrs. Potter. It is an inherent quality of Parseltongue that it triggers a powerful fear reaction within those who cannot speak it. That is the primary reason it is so difficult to learn. Most dedicated students with an ear for languages could probably master Parseltongue in under a year except for the unfortunate complication that simply *listening* to it for

extended periods of time prior to mastery often causes extreme psychological distress. We generally do not even allow any student here at the Temple of Wisdom to begin a study prior to mastering the third-level of Occlumency or the equivalent." He smiled at an old memory. "Sometimes, of course, that aspect of the language can be quite useful. Many years ago, I once drove off a gang of Muggles who sought to do me harm simply by loudly insulting their ancestry in Parseltongue."

The healer shifted in his chair before changing the topic. "But setting aside your own psychological response to your son's ability, I am more interested in how he came to possess it. The British news articles I read seemed to suggest that he acquired the skill from Lord ... You-Know-Who through what was described as '*right of magical conquest*,' a fanciful suggestion that seems like something out of a children's fairy tale. Tell me, does your other son show any signs of being a Parselmouth?"

Lily frowned at the mention of Harry. "None that I'm aware of. Though to be honest, Harry didn't grow up around us, so I really couldn't say definitively. He's given no sign of being able to talk to snakes since he's come back to our family."

Baskar nodded. "And if I may ask, under what circumstances was your other son separated from your family?"

Lily looked down at the table and took a deep breath before exhaling. "When Harry was a baby, I made a decision that I thought was the right thing at the time but which I've since realized was a disastrous horrible mistake, one we're still trying to correct as best we can."

The healer made a mental note of the apparent sensitivity of the topic of Harry Potter. "Is there any possibility that this is a magically inherited trait? That either you or your husband are descended from Salazar Slytherin?"

"Absolutely not. James's family tree goes back almost a thousand years. There's no evidence that any of his ancestors intermarried with known or suspected Slytherin families, and after Jim was revealed publicly as a Parselmouth, James checked with all the family portraits to see if anyone had any memories of a Parselmouth in the family."

"And on your side of the family, Mrs. Potter?" he asked delicately.

"I'm a Muggleborn, Healer Baskar."

He frowned at the term. "There are no Muggleborns, Mrs. Potter. One is either magical, nonmagical, or latent-magical. Here in Shamballa, we use the terms *Muggle* and *squib* only when the idiosyncrasies of Language compel us to. Your parents, grandparents, and other forebears may have lacked obvious magical potential, but somewhere in your family tree, one of your ancestors was a witch or wizard, or else you would not be here for this conversation." He paused to study Lily's reactions. "As I'm sure you know quite well, Mrs. Potter. You strike me as a highly intelligent woman, one who is also a Hogwarts Professor. The unlettered masses may entertain fantasies of nonmagicals stealing away the magic from their children to leave them as squibs, but no educated wizard or witch believes that a *Muggleborn* is anything other than the magical offspring born of a lineage of latent wizards. Though, of course, a great many educated wizards and

witches still *feign* belief in such fantasies for personal or political reasons when they really know better."

"Well, be that as it may, Healer Baskar," Lily said firmly, "I am confident that there are no wizards in my family history as far back as I've been able to trace it."

If Gupta Baskar noticed that Lily avoided eye contact as she made that declaration, he was too polite to comment.

"And besides," she continued, "if Jim's Parseltongue comes from my side of the family, why can't *I* speak to snakes?"

"Well, you're a *woman*, of course," he said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. She narrowed her eyes dangerously at what she assumed was some form of sexism.

"I beg your pardon!" she said testily.

Baskar studied her with some confusion. "Oh, I apologize. I assumed you knew. The form of hereditary Parseltongue that Salazar Slytherin incorporated into his genetic code only manifests in his male descendants. Women can, of course, learn Parseltongue the hard way just as I did, but they cannot inherit it naturally just by virtue of being one of Slytherin's heirs."

She paused in surprise. "Oh, no, I didn't know... Wait, Slytherin's genetic code? You understand genetics?" The witch appeared visibly shocked by his casual use of the scientific term.

The healer nodded. "Naturally. In addition to a Mastery in Magical Healing, I also hold an M.D. from Johns Hopkins in America, and I strive to stay abreast of new developments in both magical and Muggle healing."

Lily's eyes lit up, and she started asking him surprisingly insightful questions about the application of Muggle science to magical practices. Bascar smiled to himself.

*"In retrospect," he thought, "I suppose I should have led with the fact that I have a Muggle medical degree if I wanted her to agree to my recommendations. Lily Potter is exactly the sort of witch who would consider a university certificate more impressive than even a dozen Masteries."*

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### ***Jim and the Healer***

When Jim returned to Healer Baskar's office, he noticed that the furniture had been rearranged somewhat. The desk and most of the chairs around it were gone. Only two comfortable chairs remained situated so as to face each other. To the side of one was a small table holding a tiny glass globe. Baskar gestured for Jim to take a seat, and as he did so, the healer produced a long thin willow wand with which he affirmed his healer's oath of patient confidentiality before placing the wand next to the globe.

"Now that the formalities are done, Mr. Potter," the healer began as he the opposite seat, "I'd like to start with a general Legilimency scan to assess the current state of your mind and soul so that I can properly devise a course of treatment. Have you learned how to clear your thoughts yet?"

Jim frowned. "Not really. Professor Dumbledore worked with me some, but we didn't make much progress last year before things ... went crazy."

Baskar nodded. "Well, I shall endeavor to avoid looking at any particular thoughts or memories. And since you can't



actively clear your mind, you can do the next best thing – ask me questions!"

"About what?" Jim asked.

"About whatever pops into your head. Your goal is to keep your attention directed towards my responses and any follow-up questions you choose to make so that you don't have an opportunity to fixate on personal memories you do not want me to see." And with that, Baskar held up his hands in front of Jim's face and waved them back and forth several times in a stylized manner before gently touching the boy's temples with his middle fingers. "*Contact*," he whispered softly.

Jim had been surprised by the man's approach to mind-reading which seemed different from both Dumbledore and Snape, and his first question was about his Legilimency technique.

"Your Professors Snape and Dumbledore are, understandably, steeped in Western magical tradition," Baskar replied without taking his eyes off of Jim's. "Specifically, the Merlinian system and its reliance on wands and incantations. While I am proficient with wandless magic, I learned Legilimency in India where our traditional magical styles rely on mudras and katas as magical foci instead of wands."

"Mudras?" the boy asked with some confusion.

"A mudra is a stylized hand movement with magical significance within Indian mysticism. A kata is much the same except that it involves the whole body and is more associated with Chinese mysticism."

"I know what katas are. We learn them in Taekwando. Do you mean you can use those to do wandless magic?"

"Not in the sense you mean. In the Merlinian system - try not to blink so much if you can help it - anyway, in the Merlinian system, one learns to cast a spell with wand and incantation first. Then, after years spent mastering a spell, the wizard is eventually able to imagine casting the spell so clearly that he does not actually need the wand or the words to cast the spell. Traditionalist Eastern wizards, however, do not begin their studies with wands or words but with meticulously exacting body movements. This general technique has many forms and many names depending on where in Asia you find yourself. In India, it is known as the Mayavani technique, while in China, its more martial equivalent is called Wu Xi Do. Here in Shamballa, Language generally renders our common approach as the Enlightened Path."

Jim frowned as he considered the healer's words while trying to hold eye contact. "So why would people ever use wands if it's possible to just use your bare hands?"

"Because the process of learning magic through the Enlightened Path is incredibly exacting, to the extent that we generally begin magical training at the age of four instead of eleven. However, using a *tool* instead of just the body allows one to produce magical effects with movements that are at once less complicated and less precise. In China and Japan, swords have been popular magical foci for many centuries, and nearly every magical culture has made extensive use of carefully crafted wooden staffs. The innovation of the Roman wizard Merlinus Ambroginus was to carve a staff down into a hollow wand and then fill its interior with biological matter from a magical creature of some kind. The result was a lightweight instrument that

could be held in one hand and was inherently magical. Wands can be used to cast Charms with very simple movements that don't require the high levels of precision or physicality demanded by other foci. A wizard who studied the Enlightened Path was considered a Charms master if he could perform twenty-five or more Charms with just body movements. A wizard trained with a staff was considered a Charms master if he could use it to cast a hundred Charms. With a wand, a Charms Master is expected to know a thousand or more Charms. According to his biographical information, your Charms instructor Filius Flitwick has committed over 20,000 Charms to memory."

The boy blinked as he absorbed all that. Like every other British wizard, he knew who Merlin was ... sort of. Depending on which historian you asked, Merlin was either one incredibly powerful and long-lived wizard who influenced European and especially British wizardry for over a thousand years ... or else he (or she) was one of at least five individual wizards who'd all had similar names that got shortened to Merlin by sloppy record-keeping. The fabled wand-maker Merlinus Ambroginus was only oldest name associated with "Merlin" according to his *History of Magic* notes. Jim was actually more intrigued by the reference to Professor Flitwick. He'd known the diminutive Charms Master for years and had completely failed to realize how exceptional he was within his area of expertise.

"So why do the wizards and witches here still use those other, um, *foci*?"

"Foci is the plural of focus. And it's for a variety of reasons. The most important is that we have kept ourselves separate from the West for most of our history. The Romans never came this far East, and the Ottomans were only occasional visitors. Muggle Britain has dominated both India and

China but only quite recently by our reckoning, and not many wizards came with them. We have only had wand-makers in this part of the world for the past few centuries, and to be frank, their quality remains below that of the top European wand-makers like Gregorovich and Ollivander who are the inheritors of a 2,000-year-old art form. But more importantly, there are inherent advantages of our traditional techniques which, to many of us, outweigh the superior Charm-casting advantages of wand-working. Some of those advantages we'll be discussing as part of your treatment."

With that, the healer removed his fingers from Jim's temples and leaned back in his chair. Then, he took up his wand and tapped it against the globe which lit up with a soft light. Baskar addressed the globe, and its light shimmered in response to his words.

"This is Chief Mind Healer Gupta Baskar on 3 July 1993 recording the results of a preliminary psychic examination of one James Evan Potter Junior. Subject is a male wizard of British birth and descent approximately one month shy of his thirteenth birthday. Subject has an unusually strong core for his age registering between 9 and 11 on the Lubinsky-Chang scale, and he has completed two years of Hogwarts curriculum. Preliminary soul analysis indicates the following proportions: Air and Earth each between 15 and 20%. Fire a whopping 55%. Water less than 3%. Assessment of elemental soul sub-aspects to come later. Subject presents emotionally as a fairly well-adjusted boy for his age, but there are lingerings symptoms of PTSD and also aftereffects of exposure to a cursed Occlumency text which has resulted in a recent history of anger management issues. I am prescribing as an initial treatment an introduction into Water-style Wu Xi Do both as a

relaxation and meditation tool and also to help realign the subject's Fire-Water imbalance."

Baskar tapped the globe again with his wand and it disappeared. Then, he turned to Jim with a smile. "Now, I suppose your wondering that all that jargon means. Where would you like to start?"

"Um, my ... Fire-Water imbalance, I guess?"

"There are four metaphysical components to the wizarding soul. In India, we have traditionally described them using the four traditional elements of the Buddhist cosmology: Air, Earth, Fire and Water. In the West, they might instead be described using the four bodily humours: sanguine, choleric, melancholic, and phlegmatic. Or to put it into more familiar terms, your extreme imbalance in favor of the Fire element is why you are a Gryffindor instead of a Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw and why there was never a chance of you being a Slytherin even though the Sorting Hat surely knew you were a Parselmouth."

"Actually, the Hat offered me Slytherin."

"And let me guess, you rejected the suggestion out of hand and practically begged for Gryffindor."

Jim blushed at that as Baskar continued.

"In fact, I would hazard a guess that the Sorting Hat sensed your Fire-Water imbalance - or however a magical hat might consider it - and encouraged you to go to Slytherin in the hopes that being around so many Water-aligned classmates might help you to realign."

The boy considered that. "How do you know so much about Hogwarts Sortings?"

"Personal experience. I was sorted into Ravenclaw in 1914, though I returned to Shamballa after my Fourth Year and eventually took my OWLS here. The British climate was not conducive to my health." Then, Baskar chuckled. "By which I mean both the Scottish weather *and* the local political climate, but that's neither here nor there."

Jim pondered about that remark before moving on. "And my anger management issues?" he asked.

"Being Fire-aligned, you might be expected to have behavioral problems of that nature, but they were surely aggravated by the Occlumency book you had been studying as well as PTSD arising from your two encounters with Voldemort." He paused. "I notice you don't flinch at that name."

Jim smiled. "Somebody tries to kill you enough, you get used to it. At this point, I refuse to give the bastard the satisfaction of being afraid of him."

"Of course. *Exactly* as a Fire-aligned would say."

Jim's smile faded. "And that's ... a problem, then?"

"It is not a problem for one aspect to predominate, Mr. Potter. That's actually usually the case. It *is* a problem for one aspect to outweigh *the other three combined* and for one – the Water aspect, in this case – to be almost wholly absent. Based on my assessment and without having any personal knowledge of your personality and history, I would predict that you have a tendency to react on instinct instead of after considering all your options, that you have a heroic impulse that almost rises to the point of a martyr complex, and that you are generally impatient and impetuous in your decision-making. I also suspect that this imbalance is your biggest stumbling block to becoming an Occlumens, a skill

that is generally considered Water-aligned. Would you say that describes your fairly well?"

The boy nodded. "And we're going to correct that with ... magical Kung Fu?"

Baskar snorted softly. "It's hardly Kung Fu, Mr. Potter. To the uninitiated, the style you'll be learning might look somewhat like Tai Chi, though its forms would look completely different to anyone who actually knew anything about Tai Chi. Basically, you'll be learning a system of body movements that will focus your magic through your body in a way that will relax your mind and harmonize the disparate elements of your soul."

Jim's eyes lit up. "Will I be able to learn to cast spells with martial arts?!"

Baskar suppressed a laugh. "Theoretically... if you practice at least ten hours a day ... for the next ten or so years. Right now, we're focusing on a more realistic goal of you spending an hour or so every day working on katas that will help you to control your emotions and experience a less stressful life."

Jim laughed as well. "Okay, we'll *start* with that."

## Chapter End Notes

AN1: I swear to God and JKR, I wrote 95% of this chapter prior to seeing "Doctor Strange," and in particular, the Himalayan magical city of Shamballa was called that in my notes over four months ago. While Jim (and a few others) will be studying what appear to be wandless magical martial arts, they will not be remotely as flashy as in Doctor Strange or the Matrix, although a few Wu Xi Do tricks that Jim picks up may seem familiar.

AN2: Likewise, while elemental aspects are discussed as a fixture of Eastern mysticism, rest assured no one is going to learn Fire-bending or anything of that ilk nor any other form of elemental manipulation. While I love Avatar: The Last Airbender, that's not how things work in the POSverse. Wu Xi Do may provide Jim a few cool tricks, but he won't be wandlessly shooting fireballs or jets of water with his bare hands or flying through the air without a broom.



# Prelude (Jim) pt 2

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### **CHAPTER 4: Jim Potter and the Beast of Shamballa (pt 2)**

***15 July 1993***

***Longbottom Manor***

As the warm afternoon sun shone down on his back, Harry Potter sat alone at a table on the balcony outside his room at Longbottom Manor while going over his daily correspondence (which was unusually heavy for a boy not yet thirteen). At the moment, he was reading the letter from his twin brother that had just arrived from India, and he suppressed a twinge of jealousy that Jim Potter of all people would be receiving specialized instruction into how to incorporate Parseltongue into spellcasting. Of course, once Harry was the Prince of Slytherin, he would have access to the largest treasure trove of Parseltongue lore in the world, but it still chafed that Jim would come back from India knowing more about their mutual gift than he. The boy shook his head as he shrugged off the negative emotions. He had business to attend to here in Britain that took precedence over both Parseltongue and sibling rivalry. Besides, from the tone of Jim's letters, had Harry gone to India as well, he would be spending as much time embroiled in interpersonal drama as he would be learning new magic.

From the nearby swimming pool, Harry heard a soft splash as Neville dove in for yet another set of laps. The young

Slytherin glanced down at his friend and watched as he tore furiously through the water. Neville had been in a right state ever since Hermione's letters arrived from Italy the day before. The girl seemed quite eager to set up a "support group" for Theo Nott, a prospect which baffled Harry and enraged Neville. Not even several hours spent wrestling with a Venomous Tentacula had cooled his fury, so the boy had spent most of the afternoon engaged in disturbingly vigorous swimming. After at least fifty laps so far, he showed no signs of slowing down.

Harry had quietly broached the topic of Neville's extreme reaction to Theo's Ultimate Sanction with Lady Augusta. Aside from the obvious effects the spell seemed to have on Neville's mental health, it seemed increasingly likely that Neville's attitude might complicate their mutual plans for the summer. Augusta nodded and said that she was "considering options."

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### ***Earlier...***

*"I must say, Lady Augusta, that you seem to be handling the effects of the Ultimate Sanction rather well," Harry had said. "If it's not rude for me to ask, are you an Occlumens?"*

*"As I have stated, Harry," she replied imperiously. "I disapprove of the studying of Occlumency both due to its social stigma and attendant risk of mental impairment."*

*"So you have, Lady Augusta. And if I may say so, the way you just dodged my question was worthy of a Slytherin."*

*The dowager turned to Harry and lifted her chin. "Thank you, Harry. The Sorting Hat did offer it as my second choice, after all."*

---

**Now ...**

Harry smiled at the memory as he continued to read Jim's letter. The Slytherin in him kept looking for subtext or hidden messages, and he was continually annoyed to not find any, but his inner Gryffindor found Jim's hopelessly direct writing style to be almost refreshing considering how many letters he'd exchanged with other Slytherins so far this summer.

"*Speaking of which*," Harry thought to himself as he set aside his twin's letter and pulled a fresh sheet of parchment and an Everfull Quill from his bag. After mentally composing his message, he set to writing.

*To My Good Friend Marcus Flint -*

*When last we spoke, you reminded me of your intention to return to Hogwarts for an eighth year to finish NEWTS level instruction in Transfiguration, but you were concerned about the expense. I have previously assured you that I would do everything I could to help you fulfill your academic goals, and I am happy to tell you that my efforts have borne fruit. If you would do me the courtesy of coming via Floo to Longbottom Manor on the afternoon of July 24<sup>th</sup> at around two o'clock, I would be delighted to introduce you to several friends who have need of a young man possessed of your particular skills and who are prepared to pay you enough to cover your expenses for the coming school year. Trust me when I say that the job they will be offering is one for which you are particularly suited and also one of great importance to the public welfare.*

*I look forward to your response.*

*Your friend - Harry*

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**3 July 1993**  
**Shamballa**  
**(about two weeks earlier)**

A few hours after completing Jim Potter's initial examination, Healer Baskar introduced the Boy-Who-Lived to his trainer for his initiation into the mystical Four-Fold Path of Enlightenment - Padma Patil! Baskar and his niece explained that she had started training since she was a little girl, though she had perhaps not been as diligent as most of the initiates, particularly so after starting Hogwarts. Nevertheless, she was fully qualified to introduce Jim to the basic concepts, and Baskar thought Jim would be more comfortable taking such instruction from someone he knew than a stranger. Padma would spend the afternoon and part of the next day teaching Jim the basic relaxation katas which were designed to promote mental healing. Then, she and they would join one of the classes at the Temple of Wisdom along with a room full of acolytes who were studying a series of movements which would replicate the most basic levels of Occlumency. In the meantime, Healer Baskar would consider the best approach for allowing Jim to conceal his personal thoughts from Legilimency (a skill far beyond the beginning levels of the Path). Jim inquired after Ron, but the healer somewhat evasively said that the other boy would require some additional healing of a less physical nature but that he would be joining them in a few days.

Padma showed Jim to a locker room where he changed into the clothing provided: a yellow martial arts uniform similar to a gi or a dobok but with a small magically-reinforced pocket for holding a wand securely without any chance of it breaking. When he came out of the locker room, Padma was waiting for him in an identical outfit except that hers had

two patches, one green and one blue, sewn onto the sleeve. He asked about them.

"Oh those?" she replied. "We don't change belt colors as we advance the way Muggle martial artists do. We just transfigure our patches. This one identifies me as a ninth-step acolyte of the Path of Water and a twelfth-step acolyte of the Path of Air."

Jim whistled. "Impressive."

Padma chuckled softly. "Not really. There are 433 steps on each of the four Paths. I started when I was seven, which is actually kind of old to begin training, and I didn't really take it as seriously as I should have. I mainly focused on Mayavani mudras that would help me in my future education. Water to improve memory and keep me calm under stress. Air to improve my intuition and analytical skills."

"Do they really help with that?"

"I'm third in our class, Jim," she said with a mischievous smile. "Draw your own conclusions."

As the two talked, Padma led Jim down a corridor to a 30x30 exercise room with mirrors covering every wall and thickly padded floors. In one corner was a brass sitar mounted on a stand. Padma stroked the sitar's strings gently and said "Water Style. First Degree. Peace and Relaxation." Immediately, the sitar started playing a gentle relaxing tune, and Jim was surprised to hear the soft sounds of waves lapping against a shore, sounds that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere.

"Right, listen up, Jim Potter. Because this will be simultaneously one of the easiest and one of the hardest

things you've ever had to do." Padma paused. "Mentally, that is – I'm sure it's not nearly as hard as killing a Basilisk or any of that fash. First of all, just stand still with your eyes closed and listen to the music while you think about being relaxed and at peace with yourself. Let yourself sway in time with the music if you're into that. Then, when you're ready, open your eyes and just start to move. I'll be doing the same kata beside you, and you can see us both in the mirror. Use my movements as a rough guide but you don't have to mirror me perfectly. The easy part is that you don't have to do anything yourself. Just let magic and intent guide your body. The hard part is that what I just told you to do defies everything your Taekwando teachers ever told you about executing your forms perfectly, as well as everything that you as a Gryffindor understand about ... well, about being a Gryffindor, I suppose.

Jim's forehead furrowed a bit at that last comment, but he nodded and closed his eyes for a good fifteen seconds to focus on the gentle music. Then, he opened them to see his and Padma's reflections in the mirror in front of them. Padma was already moving in time with music, her movements graceful and sinuous. In fact, Jim thought they were quite ... serpentine.

"So, um, are you actually going to teach me the moves?" he asked.

"No," the witch replied placidly. "You're going to decide that you want to feel peaceful and relaxed, and then you'll simply move. Magic will do the rest, guiding your movements as necessary ... if you can get your ego out of the way long enough."

Jim made a face. "My ego isn't *that* big."

She laughed. "I didn't say it was. *Everyone* has an ego, a sense of self-importance that stops you from letting your Magic simply lead you along the Path to where you want to go. Stop thinking so hard and just ... be."

Jim fought the urge to roll his eyes and instead started copying Padma's movements while trying to keep his head clear. It wasn't easy. Jim had come to understand what Healer Baskar had meant by his "fiery Gryffindor nature." It seemed like no matter how hard he tried to clear his mind, his thoughts were always churning and racing. Nevertheless, after about five minutes of trying to follow Padma's flowing movements, it felt like his mind was finally slowing down and his breathing was more relaxed. He also noticed to his surprise that even though he didn't actually *know* the movements for this kata, he was now somehow performing it perfectly in sync with his tutor even though there seemed to be no rhyme or pattern to the movements.

"I think I'm getting the hang of this," he said.

"This is the most basic pattern of Water Style, but yes, you are coming along very nicely for your first lesson."

He chuckled. "Maybe I'll be some kind of martial arts prodigy."

"And *there's* that Gryffindor ego. Allow me to puncture it by noting that *four-year-olds* pick up this technique after a few hours."

Jim blushed slightly. He was silent for another moment before speaking again. "Does this style have any, um, combat applications?"

"All of the styles do according to their nature. Water style is a passive style that focuses on dodging and redirecting attacks."

"Like Judo or Aikido?"

"I'll take your word for it. I know very little about Muggle martial arts."

He nodded and was silent for a few more minutes.

"So do *you* know how to fight?"

"I can defend myself," she said primly as she raised her arm gracefully over her head and then brought it back down like a wave slowly crashing against a shoreline. "Somewhere around the eighteenth or nineteenth step on the Water Path, I should learn how to do nerve strikes that paralyze my opponents, but I can already cast Petrificus Totalus with a wand, so it's not really a priority."

"After we get to a stopping point, can you show me some moves?" he said with poor attempt at being casual.

Padma sighed loudly before turning to face Jim. "Fine. We'll get this out of the way now since you obviously won't stop thinking about it until we do." She stepped back and assumed a relaxed (looking) martial arts pose. "Hit me," she said.

Jim stopped his own movements and studied the girl before looking around somewhat nervously. In the background, the enchanted sitar continued to play. "Seriously?"

She nodded. "Come on then, Mighty Gryffindor. Show me what Taekwando can do!"



The boy shrugged and assumed a fighting pose. He bounced lightly on the balls of his feet for a few seconds while Padma waited calmly. Then, he lashed out with a kick to the girl's leg, though one without much force. To his surprise, Padma leaned to the side, casually dodging his kick and the next three that followed it without the slightest apparent effort. Now a bit frustrated, Jim attacked with his best roundhouse kick. This time, Padma didn't dodge but instead caught Jim's leg with her hands. Surprisingly though, she seemed to exert no force in blocking his kick. Instead, she simply placed her hands in the path of Jim's leg and then twisted them slightly. Instantly, the momentum that Jim had put into the kick changed its direction, and Jim was shocked when his whole body twisted around before he was dumped face first onto the padded floor. Instantly, he whirled around in surprise.

"How did you...?" he exclaimed. "I didn't even feel you grab my leg."

"I *didn't* grab your leg. I redirected the motion of your attack with a water mudra. Water style is about moving around attacks and redirecting them into other directions, much like water finding its way past obstacles."

Jim absorbed that explanation as he climbed to his feet. "So can you use it for direct attacks?"

"Not yet. Well, not with Water style, yet. I'm further along with Air style."

He smiled almost mischievously. "Show me?"

Padma rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Gryffindors," she sighed. Then, in a swift movement, she crossed her arms in front of her chest and then uncrossed them so that they were stretched out like a bird's wings. And like a bird,

she was suddenly airborne nearly four feet off the ground with her legs tucked up under her and nearly even with Jim's head. In a flash, she struck with a mighty kick that hit Jim right in the solar plexus and sent him flying twenty feet across the room. He landed roughly and coughed a few times before looking up towards Padma in shock.

"Okay, -cough- I probably deserved that, but wasn't that bit of overkill? I mean, you could have really hurt me with that!" Then, he paused in confusion and felt his chest where Padma's kick had struck. It didn't even feel sore.

"You *should* have really hurt me with that! How did you not hurt me even though you kicked me the length of a room?!"

Padma chuckled as she walked over. "Jim, if you want to study magical martial arts, you will first have to accept the fact that they are *magical*. Muggle martial arts are governed by physics and biology. Magical martial arts are governed by *intent*. I had no desire to hurt you, and so my kick *didn't* hurt you even though it did knock you across the room. In fact, to be honest, at my current step on the Path of Air, I don't think I *can* form the intent to harm needed to truly injure someone with just an attack. I mean, if you were at the edge of a cliff or at the top of a tall staircase, you might get hurt or even killed if I knocked you over, but I literally can't cause direct bodily harm with any of my current techniques. If I push myself this summer, then *maybe* I'll be high enough to intentionally injure someone with an Air attack, assuming for some silly reason I was inclined to do so. We'll see."

As she reached down to help the boy up, his face thoughtful as he considered her words.

"Now then," Padma said. "Can we please get back to the stuff you're *supposed* to be studying? I promised Uncle

Gupta that I'd have you ready for an actual *class* by tomorrow afternoon."

"You really think I'll be ready to practice in front of a group by tomorrow?" Jim asked in surprise.

"Not only ready," she answered with a smirk. "You'll be head and shoulders above the rest."

---

### ***4 July 1993***

As he surveyed the classroom, Jim resisted the temptation to stick his tongue out at Padma. He was indeed head and shoulders above the rest of the class ... as every other student was somewhere between the ages of 5 and 7. There were about forty pint-sized martial artists in the room, all of them already performing the relaxation kata in perfect unison. And based on his embarrassing "fight" with Padma the previous day, he figured half of the little sprogs could probably beat the stuffing out of him.

In the front of the classroom, Jim saw the tall muscular monk he'd briefly encountered the day before and who was now leading the group in their exercises. The one who looked like a bald-headed European who'd been in way too many knife fights judging by the scars on his exposed arms. "Brother Chandra" (if Jim remembered the man's name properly) glanced over at the two and practically grimaced. He immediately stopped his kata, and as one, the young students snapped to attention.

"Students," he said with only a hint of harshness in his voice, "we are honored with a special guest today – Jim Potter, who is known around the world as the famous 'Boy-Who-Lived!' Please afford him every courtesy."

The children in the class, none of whom seemed to have any idea who Jim was, turned towards him and bowed in unison. Jim returned the bow clumsily and then turned back towards Brother Chandra who once again seemed to regard him with barely concealed dislike. Inexplicably, Jim had a flashback to his first day of Potions with Snape, and he desperately hoped today didn't turn into as big a fiasco.

"You and Padma may take a spot all the way in the back, Mr. Potter," Chandra said. "We wouldn't want you block the younger students' view, after all."

Jim nodded and allowed Padma to lead him to the back of the room. He noticed that even Padma was surprised by Brother Chandra's attitude.

"I get the feeling he doesn't like you, Jim," the girl whispered. "It's very strange. I've studied under him since I was a little girl, and he's always been very kind, especially with new students."

"How long has he been here?" Jim asked quietly.

The girl thought. "He started training me when I was about seven, and I think he said he'd been here for about four or five years at that point. He was from Britain originally. He must have come here after the war."

As the two took their positions and joined in the group kata, Jim studied the instructor as best he was able, with particular emphasis on the man's forearms. They were bare and free of tattoos, but that didn't necessarily prove anything. As far as Jim knew, there was only one sort of person who might have fled Britain in 1982 and who would hate the Boy-Who-Lived on sight.

A Death Eater.

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## **6 July 1993**

Death Eater or no, Brother Chandra took no harmful actions against Jim beyond constant sullen glares. It was a somewhat surprising attitude given the man's otherwise sterling reputation within the Temple. According to Padma, Chandra had mastered the 99th Step along the Path of Water, and he was nearly as high in the other three paths, a meteoric rise for someone who didn't start until his twenties. Even more surprising, Chandra had chosen to pursue all four paths in harmony instead of just one. Had he specialized, Chandra would likely be much higher ranked and have a much more influential position within the Temple of Wisdom. Regardless, the man should be the equivalent of a Level 3 Occlumens, and for him to show so much obvious anger told Jim that Chandra either didn't care about letting the boy know how much the man disliked him ... or Chandra's anger at Jim was so great that he was literally unable to Occlude it away.

On the morning of the 6th, Ron finally joined Jim and Padma in training. The other boy had spent most of the last two days in private sessions with Healer Baskar, and he was still reluctant to share too much with Jim, who elected not to push. If nothing else, Ron seemed calmer and more at peace than when they'd left Great Britain.

The two boys spent about three hours a day on Water Style. That was the only time they ever saw Padma, who was otherwise engaged in private martial arts lessons. The rest of the time, Jim and Ron spent on Parseltongue lessons, both learning more about their rare ability and, to their mutual surprise, *teaching* the ability to others. As Healer Gupta explained, a non-Parselmouth could actually "learn" the language by rote-memorizing a set number of

Parseltongue phrases. After learning how to "pronounce" (i.e. accurately hiss) enough phrases flawlessly, the student would "harmonize" with the inherent magic of the language and thereafter be able to understand the whole language intuitively. Unfortunately, the process wasn't as easy as it sounded. First, the number of phrases that would need to be memorized ranged from several hundred to over a thousand depending on the individual learner's innate facility with magical languages. Second, the pronunciation had to be *perfect* which was incredibly difficult for human beings not inherently able to detect the subtle variations in snake hisses. Finally, and most problematically, Parseltongue triggered an automatic fear response in most people who didn't speak it, and according to Gupta, most students who tried to learn the language had breakdowns and gave up before properly mastering even a hundred phrases.

To hopefully improve Gupta's teaching methods, the boys were asked to spend several hours a day speaking various English sentences followed by their Parseltongue equivalents while in front of the glass globes that were used in Shamballa for recording purposes. Gupta himself had generated several hours worth of Parseltongue globes for students to listen to, but he theorized that the circumstances by which Ron and Jim had learned the language might make it "purer" than his self-taught version and thus easier for aspiring Parselmouths to master.

Last but certainly not least, the two boys spent several hours every day with Gupta himself learning what he called "Parselmagic."

"I should say that *Parselmagic* is not an officially recognized term, my friends," he had explained during the first session. "It's an neologism I came up with to describe the effects of

saying conventional Western magical incantations in Parseltongue. Most of the time, there's no discernible difference in the effects, but some spells are more powerful when cast with Parseltongue, and a few spells are *much* more powerful when cast with Parseltongue. There is an anecdotal evidence of past Parselmouths casting in this way, most notably the Dark Lord from whom you two acquired your own abilities. However, as an organized field of analytical study, this is all quite new and, well, I'm apparently the only one who's studying it. Frankly, I am delighted to have other Parselmouths who can confirm my findings."

Thus far, those findings were somewhat sparse. The most important was that the more S's there were in the incantation, the more of a boost it got from being spoken in Parseltongue. By an interesting coincidence, this included a large number of both healing spells and damaging curses. Both Ron and Jim noted that it felt uncomfortable and strange to cast in Parseltongue, but Jim did notice that his Expelliarmus was more powerful when hissed. Unfortunately, that hiss added onto the end word ("**EXPELLIARMUSSSSS!**") significantly increased the casting time to the point that Jim thought it would be less useful in a duel than casting the spell normally despite the more potent effects from a successful Parselmagic hit.

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## ***7 July 1993***

### ***Healer Baskar's Office***

The next day, Jim was called to a meeting with Gupta Baskar while Ron and Padma trained together without him.

"Good afternoon, Jim," Baskar said cheerfully as he gestured for Jim to take a seat. "I've called you in because I

wanted to talk to you about your Occlumency situation. First of all, how do you feel about your Water style progress?"

Jim thought about the question. "I feel more ... relaxed, which is good I guess. I'm not sure that it's translated into better Occlumency shields."

"No, I imagine it hasn't. As we discussed during your initial interview, you have an extremely powerful Fire nature which resists Water style mental conditioning. I do want you to continue studying Water style for its mental health benefits, but I don't think it's going to help you develop psychic shields in the near future. And just to clarify, your primary goal is simply to be able block Legilimency, correct? To conceal secrets you consider too dangerous to know?"

Jim nodded.

"Well, then. I think it's time we considered alternative approaches. If you don't mind, we'll start with the simplest one first." Baskar paused. "I apologize. This might be a bit ... painful."

Jim hardly had time to respond before he felt a powerful Legilimency attack burning into his mind. For just a few seconds, he was back in the Chamber of Secrets, dying in agony from the Basilisk's bite. Then, it was over and he was slumped back in his chair as the Healer stood over him holding out a Headache Potion.

"What the hell was that?!" Jim exclaimed.

"A waste of time, I'm afraid. A small percentage of wizards can quickly develop an automagical defense to Legilimency when exposed to intentionally painful psychic assaults. For



the rest of us, it just ... hurts. You are not part of that fortunate minority, but I thought it best to eliminate the possibility before moving on to the more ... complicated approach." With that, Baskar pulled out his wand and summoned his Patronus, which manifested as a silver mongoose.

"Please go to Brother Chandra and to Lily Potter and ask them both to come to my office as soon as possible." The mongoose nodded and twitched his nose before disappearing in a flash of light.

"Why do you need my Mum here?" Jim asked. "*Not to mention the guy who may be a Death Eater,*" he thought to himself nervously.

"Because the only other shortcut to viable mental defenses I know of is one that I would not wish you to pursue without discussing the matter with your parents. As you are a minor, it would be improper for me to proceed without their consent. Tell me, Jim, what do you know about ... *animagi*?"

The boy stared in confusion. "Um, not much. I know a animagus is a wizard or witch who can transform into an animal without using a spell. My Transfiguration Professor back at Hogwarts is a cat animagus."

"Really?!" Baskar perked up in surprise. "How fascinating! I should like to interview her some day to see how cat psychology has affected her human personality!"

"Uh-huh," said Jim, who was distracted by the Healer's sudden excitement. "But in the meantime, what does being an animagus have to do with Occlumency?"

"Nothing," Baskar replied. "It is completely unrelated to that power. *But* it can provide a useful substitute. During

the early phases of learning an animagus form, the wizard develops a dual-process mind. He simultaneously thinks as both a human and an animal. This provides a powerful defense against Legilimency, as the wizard can simply choose to think with his animal-mind which the human Legilimens cannot comprehend."

Jim's eyes widened in surprise. Then, he frowned in confusion. "But I thought it took a long time to become an animagus."

"Well, as I said, you don't actually need to master the skill in order to block a Legilimens. But regardless, as it happens, we are pleased to have something of an expert on the topic here at the Temple of Wisdom, one who has successfully taught a number of wizards and witches to completely master the change much more quickly than through traditional approaches."

"Brother Chandra," Jim said with a frown.

"Indeed." Baskar paused at Jim's expression. "Is there a problem between you and Brother Chandra?"

Before Jim could respond, there was a knock at the door, and then at Baskar's invitation, Brother Chandra came in, pausing only for a brief instant when he saw Jim.

"You wished to see me, Healer Baskar?" the man said coolly.

"Why yes, Chandra. I gather you've already met young Mr. Potter if only in passing. We're awaiting the boy's mother now. If she approves, I would like to ask you to take Mr. Potter on as a animagus student."

At that, Chandra looked back and forth between the Healer and the Boy-Who-Lived for an uncomfortably long time.

"No," he finally said.

"Excuse me, Brother Chandra?" Baskar asked in confusion.

"I said no, Healer Baskar. I will not train Jim Potter to become an animagus. If it is, for some unfathomable reason, necessary for his treatment to learn that skill, I will be happy to recommend former students of mine who have completed the transformation. But I will not teach this boy."

With that, Chandra turned back towards the door, while Jim shot out of his chair, uncertain as to whether he should be insulted or relieved.

"May I ask why?" Baskar persisted.

"You may ask, Healer, but I have no desire to tell. My reasons are my own." Then, Chandra yanked the door open somewhat angrily only to step back in surprise when he found Lily Potter on the other side.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Lily said, equally startled. She stepped past the monk into the room to acknowledge the Healer and her son before looking back to the man she'd almost run into. Then, her eyes widened in shock. "You!"

Chandra closed his eyes and exhaled deeply as he sought to center himself.

"Oh," said Baskar. "You two know each other?"

"Yes, Healer," Chandra said, his eyes still closed. "We do indeed."

Then, the man opened his eyes to glare at Lily Potter. For just a second, Jim thought those eyes flashed amber rather than the pale green they'd been before. And the look of

disdain that the monk had been giving him was nothing compared to the obvious contempt he had for the still speechless Lily.

"It's so very nice to see you again after all these years, Lily," said Remus Lupin with a cold sneer. "By the way ... *how's Harry?*"

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***11 February 1982***

***A quiet back booth at the Leaky Cauldron***

"They're going to send Harry to *the Dursleys!*" Remus said with visible disgust.

"I know, Remus, I know. It hurts. I remember how well you and the little tyke got on." Peter sighed as he tore off piece of bread that came with the Venison and Leek Stew that was on special today. "But I think you have to accept that this may be for the best. If Little Harry is truly a squib..."

"You *don't know* that he's a squib! And neither do James nor Lily nor Dumbledore! He's still a baby for Merlin's sake!"

"Maybe so, my friend. But the best pediatric healers at St. Mungo's agree with Dumbledore's assessment. Harry shows no signs of magic whatsoever. I'm sorry, but I agree with Dumbledore on this. If Harry's a squib, then it's a cruelty to raise him in a magical household and particularly one that might someday be targeted for revenge by Death Eaters. Better to send him off to Muggles relatives now where he'll be safe rather than let him have the memory of magic he'll never be able to use and a wizarding inheritance that will be dangled in front of him until it gets snatched away on his eleventh birthday. And besides, if he does show magic, Petunia has promised to let Lily know so we can bring him back."

"*Petunia!*" Remus practically spat the name out.  
"You *remember* what she was like!"

"Remus," said Peter gently. "This isn't about Petunia, I think. It's about you and James."

Remus stared down at his untouched bowl of stew on table. It took all his will not to grab it and fling it against a wall. "I was willing to go Muggle if that's what it took to become Harry's guardian. To forsake the magical world forever and live as a Muggle. And James laughed. He literally laughed in my face and said '*How could that ever work, Moony? You're a werewolf!*'"

Peter stiffened and looked around quickly. "Shhh!" he hissed quietly but urgently. "I know your upset, Moony, but for Merlin's sake, let's not start a riot in the heart of Diagon Alley."

Remus scoffed. "I set up a privacy ward, Peter. I'm not stupid."

Peter relaxed but only a little. "I know you're not stupid, Remus. You've always been the smartest of us all. But ... you're emotional right now. We're all still raw about everything that's happened, and I understand that. But try to think about this sensibly. Given your condition, you'll always have difficulty maintaining employment even if no one knows the real reason why. You'll have constant health issues. You'll have to arrange for someone to take Harry when it's ... your time of the month. And if it *ever* gets out about your furry little problem, not only will Harry be taken from you by the Ministry and you probably *put down like a rabid beast*, but James and Lily might be judged unfit parents for entrusting you with him, and they could lose Jim

as well." Peter took a deep breath. "And that doesn't even get into..."

Remus looked up at him sharply. "Into what?"

The rat animagus grimaced and put on a show of reluctance and embarrassment. "I think James and Lily thought you might ... that you might finally be going *dark*."

The werewolf's nostrils flared angrily and he suppressed the urge to growl. "It's been *sixteen years*! Sixteen years and I've never given in to the Beast! How could they possibly think such a thing?!"

Peter shrugged. "Well, let's be honest. You *are* rather unusual in that regard. Possibly unique. Besides ... I think... that Sirius may have put the idea into their heads. Possibly as a way of further isolating the Potters before You-Know-Who's attack."

"*Actually*," he thought to himself smugly, even as his face remained a mask of compassion, "*it was me putting the idea into Sirius's head first, but let's not quibble over who started that ugly rumor.*"

Remus shook his head in amazement. "I still can't believe that. Sirius Black, of all people. I've known him since I was *eleven*. I could conceive of him doing some pretty bad things but *never* in the service of You-Know-Who. What happened to him?!"

"I dunno. Life, maybe?" Peter paused to take a spoonful of stew as he considered his words. "You know as well as I that the Marauders started drifting apart after that business with Snivellus and the Shrieking Shack. And then James started dating Lily at last, and Black was suddenly a third wheel." He chuckled softly. "I was never quite sure who

Sirius was most jealous of – Lily for stealing away his best friend, or James for finally landing Lily right after Sirius and Marlene broke up for good. And *then* we graduated and went our separate ways. Regulus died around then leaving Sirius as the only viable Black heir. I was unemployed and stuck at home taking care of Mother. You were off with the werewolf packs on the continent, a fact which James and Sirius and Lily all found ... suspicious."

Remus's eyes goggled. "I was *doing that* at the personal request of Albus Dumbledore! He needed a spy within the packs to find out if they were going to ally with the Death Eaters! I risked my life daily on that mission!"

Peter put his hands up to placate the other Marauder. "I know, I know. But think of it from their perspective. You were living constantly with other werewolves. With *real* werewolves."

"I *am* a real werewolf, Peter."

"You know what I mean, Moony." Peter paused for a moment as if distracted. "You know, after all these years, I've never even bothered to ask. Do you *like* being called Moony?"

Remus was surprised by the question. "I never minded it. It was just one of Sirius's little jokes. You got used to those if you spent enough time around him."

"It was Sirius sticking you with a mean-spirited nickname to remind you of your place in the pecking order," Peter said with a trace of bitterness. "You know - like *Wormtail*."

"I never realized you disliked the name Wormtail so much, Peter."

"Oh of course you did, Remus. I noticed long ago that when neither Padfoot nor Prongs was around, you *always* called me Peter. And I was always grateful." He held up his glass as if for a toast. "Here's to the bottom half of the Marauders – Moony and Wormtail. May we always remember our place ... and who our real friends are."

Remus snorted and clinked his glass against his friend's. The two each took a drink. But then, Peter grew more serious.

"But I digress. You were off with werewolf packs who generally if not universally lack your apparently unique self-control and dignity. Honestly, Remus, how did you avoid killing innocent people when you were running with the packs? How did you avoid *eating* innocent people?"

Remus leaned back and looked away. "With great difficulty and almost Slytherinesque cunning. But I did it. My slate is still clean. My ledger has no red in it. But that still didn't stop James and Lily from just assuming ..."

Remus paused abruptly suddenly overcome with emotion. He rubbed his face with his hands, trying to wipe away tears with as much dignity as he could muster. Peter suddenly became very interested in his venison stew which he toyed with for several seconds while the other man fought to regain his composure.

"There's nothing for me here in Britain, is there Peter?" Remus finally said.

"You've still got me, old bean," Peter said meaningfully. "Always."

"I know Peter, and thank you. But this country has too many bad memories. Perhaps a few years on the Continent will do



me good."

Peter scoffed. "If there's nothing for you here in Britain where you at least have a network of friends, one of whom is quite wealthy, then there's definitely nothing for you in *France or Germany*. None of the European Wizarding nations will treat you better than Old Blighty, and most of them will treat you worse."

Remus frowned. "Well what would you suggest, Peter?"

The other man thought for a moment. "The Far East!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Do you remember that book you found back in Fifth Year? The one about the magical city of Shamballa and the monk-wizards there who taught mystical Zen mumbo-jumbo or something like that?"

Lupin gave one of his famous long-suffering looks. "It's called the Four-Fold Path of Enlightenment, Peter. It's a perfectly legitimate approach to magic, albeit one very different from the Merlinian system."

Pettigrew waved his hand diffidently. "Whatever. Anyway, you wondered at the time if studying their techniques might allow you to gain some measure of control over your transformations. If you want a change of scenery, why not try there? You just said Dumbles owes you a favor for risking your neck during the War. Contact him and see if he can get you an introduction to the Chief Monk or Head Guru or whoever's in charge."

Remus's eyes lit up, but then he shook his head. "Peter, I don't have the funds to relocate to the other side of the world. I can't ask from Dumbledore, and I *won't* ask from James, not after he..."

"Then take some money from me, Remus." Peter put up a hand to stop his friend's objections. "It's *okay*, Remus. I've got some money to burn. I'm getting an award for helping James capture Sirius that will have some cash with it. And besides, after I turned twenty-one, I was finally able to access my father's old vault. Obviously, I'm not supplanting James as the Pampered Prince of Gryffindor, but I've got a nice little nest egg that I never knew I had."

"Your father left you an inheritance and you're just now getting it? But I thought he died when you were a small child."

Peter smiled but without any humor. "Mother did something to get it tied up until just last year. She was afraid I'd squander it, I suppose. But it's all mine now. A nice sum of Galleons ... plus a few family heirlooms hardly worth mentioning."

Remus gave Peter a quizzical look. For just a second, it seemed his fellow Marauder was struggling to suppress a giggle. Then, he shook his head. "That reminds me, Peter. I am so very sorry to hear about your mother's passing. I was in Europe at the time and knew nothing about it until quite recently. How are you holding up?"

Peter broke eye contact for a few seconds. "Oh, I'm alright, Remus. She'd been so sick for such a long time, as I'm sure you know. I'm just glad that in the end she died peacefully in her bed."

He picked up a napkin and took his time wiping his face with it. Long enough to fight down the urge to smile. "*Well, for some definitions of 'peacefully,' I suppose,*" he thought to himself.

"But enough of the past, Remus. Let's talk about your future. Tell me more about ... Shamballa."

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***From Jim Potter's letter to his brother Harry ...***

*So after that, I got kicked out of Healer Baskar's office while he, Mum, and "Brother Chandra" aka Remus Lupin talked things over. And by talked things over, I mean shouted for about twenty minutes. Apparently, Lupin was close friends with Mum and Dad back during their Hogwarts days and both our middle names come from him. Yours directly, mine in some roundabout way involving Welsh. Did you know any of that? Anyway, when you got sent to the Dursleys, he got real mad and moved all the way to the other side of the planet to study the Paths of Enlightenment, and all because Mum and Dad wouldn't let him raise you instead of that nutter Petunia and her psycho family. Unfortunately, he's got some kind of medical condition that would have made him an unfit guardian, but well, I sort of swore a vow not to tell anyone what it is. And to be fair to Mum and Dad, it really is the sort of condition that would make him unsuitable to be your guardian in most people's eyes.*

*So anyway, after a good long shout-fest, Baskar pulls me back into the room and tells me that Brother Chandra or Mr. Lupin (I'm still not sure what I'm supposed to call him) will be teaching me about becoming an animagus. Then, Chandralupin summons a big thick book about animagi and tells me to start reading it and contact him to begin actual lessons when I've finished. And then, he just storms out. Please note that I'm learning about becoming an animagus and only to the extent needed to protect my mind from intrusion. I'm not actually learning to become an animagus because if I did, I'd have to register on something*

*called the Conscription List or risk being sent to Azkaban. So don't go spreading any rumors that I'm actually becoming an unregistered animagus or something (wink, wink!).*

---

Harry laughed out loud at that. *"Seriously, Jim?! You reveal something like that in a letter and include a 'wink, wink!' Good thing for you we don't hate one another at the moment."* Later on, he would have to decide whether to burn the incriminating letter or just hide it away in the secret compartment of his trunk in case it became useful later.

In the meantime, though, the young Slytherin set his mind to Remus Lupin's mysterious "medical condition" which was so serious that it would bar him from acting as legal guardian to a child. The clues found in Jim's letter were sparse, but Harry closed his eyes and considered what he knew. Fourteen years was a long time to survive with a terminal illness, so most of those were out. Lily was letting Jim study complex magic from Lupin, so mental illness was unlikely and the guy probably wasn't a sexual predator. Then, Harry considered the few non-fatal magical illnesses he knew of along with their symptoms, and an answer immediately presented itself.

*"Of course! It's so simple!"* he thought to himself.  
*"Obviously, Remus Lupin is a vampire!"*

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## ***16 July 1993***

Jim knocked gently on the door to Brother Chandra's private rooms. "Enter," came the man's voice from inside. Jim opened the door and came in just in time to see the man

hammering a nail into a nearby wall to hang a small picture on.

"I've, um, finished the book you gave me, Brother Chandra. I think I understand the concepts involved."

"Good," said Chandra as he walked over to the boy and retrieved the book. "I'll put it back where it belongs and fetch some tea. Please make yourself comfortable."

The man exited through a door on the other side of the room, leaving Jim alone. Still somewhat nervous, the boy walked slowly around the room before stopping in front of the two pictures that Chandra had obviously just put up. One was a magical picture that showed four teenage Hogwarts students roughhousing and waving out at him from in front of the Whomping Willow. To Jim's shock, he recognized three of them instantly: teenage versions of James Potter, Peter Pettigrew, and a boy who was almost certainly Remus Lupin. The fourth one he didn't recognize, but from the context, he guessed that it was the Traitor Sirius Black. The picture hanging next to it was also a moving picture, but this one consisted of three animals: a majestic stag, a rather sinister looking black dog, and a brown rat that was perched somewhat precariously on the stag's head and holding onto its antlers for dear life. Curiously, the animals were *also* standing in front of the Whomping Willow, though the picture appeared to have been taken late at night. Jim was still studying the two photos when the man reentered the chamber bearing a tea tray.

"Please have a seat, Mr. Potter. I hope Oolong is satisfactory. Earl Grey is hard to come by in these parts." He set the tray down and took a seat. Jim did likewise. "Before we begin, I

must ask you to take an Oath of Secrecy regarding our discussions today. Any objections?"

Jim shook his head no, pulled out his wand, and swore the oath. Satisfied, the older man poured a cup of tea for himself and his student.

"Now, I'm sure you have questions and I don't know what either of your parents has told you, so why don't we start with you asking for what information you feel you need."

Jim thought. "Um, for starters, do you want me to call you Brother Chandra or Mr. Lupin? I'm fine either way."

"I think it would be best if you called me Brother Chandra when we are in front of my fellow monks or other citizens of Shamballa. When we are alone, please call me Remus. And before we proceed any further ... I wish to apologize for my earlier treatment of you. Since we last spoke, I have spent much time in meditation evaluating and isolating my own feelings. To be perfectly blunt, you parents have done things that I consider nearly unforgivable. But you are not James Potter, no matter how startling your resemblance to him might be. It was unprofessional of me to hold you responsible for things over which you had no say, and I will endeavor to treat you as your own unique personage henceforth."

Jim absorbed all that silently. "Thank you, sir, um, Remus. I accept your apology and would be pleased if you would call me Jim." He hesitated. "I want you to know that while I still love my Mum and Dad, I also know that they've made some poor decisions especially where my brother is concerned. But if you're willing to work with me, I'll do my best to be a good student." He perked up suddenly. "And, I don't know if this helps, but if the rest of this summer works out well, I'm

hoping I can talk Harry into coming back with me next summer. Then, you can finally meet him in person."

Remus's eyes widened a bit in excitement. "Yes, I would like that. Thank you, Jim. Now, do you have any other questions?" From his tone, Jim almost got the impression that Remus was prompting him about something.

The boy paused and looked around the room and over to the two photos. "That picture up there. That's ... the Marauders, right? Dad didn't tell me much about you guys, but my Uncle Pete said you were a '*quartet of merry pranksters*.' Though I kinda got the impression that he was being sarcastic about it."

Remus nodded with a slight frown. "Some people described us as merry, others as cruel, depending upon who we targeted with our pranks. Mainly, those targets were Slytherins, and since that word had nearly become synonymous with 'Junior Death Eater' by our Fifth Year, we received a great deal more respect and adulation from our peers and even our teachers than we deserved."

"I know how that goes. This past year, I got drawn into a prank war with some Slytherins ... sort of. To say it went badly is an amazing understatement. I've sworn off pranks completely now."

"Very sensible. And much more mature than we were at your age. At the time, we saw it as striking a blow against Pureblood bigots, but of course, the truth was that we were venting our own childishness against the only acceptable targets."

"Oh?" Jim asked in surprise at that description. "How so?"

"One of our dirty little secrets is that the Marauders learned early on was what a bad idea it was to harass Hufflepuffs or Ravenclaws. Hufflepuffs are all about loyalty, and if you attack one, you can expect twenty hexes a day from their friends in response. Ravenclaws are all about obscure knowledge, and if you prank one, you can expect to be pranked back with some curse that went out of fashion when Queen Anne was on the throne and that requires two weeks of research to counter. Attack a Slytherin, though? He'll just counterattack on his own or with the aid of his closest friends rather than ask for help from his House as a whole and thus show himself up as weak. Most of our conflicts were with a small coterie of Slytherins in the same year as us and who were quite free themselves with rather dark and nasty curses, and most of them did indeed go on to become Death Eaters. But I'm ashamed to say that we weren't above hexing younger Slytherins who couldn't defend themselves just because one of us overheard them refer to a classmate as a *Mudblood* or *blood traitor*. It was, on the whole, unacceptable behavior on our part, and I'm glad that by Sixth Year we finally started to outgrow it."

"Was Professor ... I mean ... was Severus Snape part of that group you fought with regularly?"

"Hmm, I'd heard he'd become a Potions instructor. Certainly he had the brains for it, but I'm amazed he found the temperament. Yes, we skirmished with Snape a great deal. He was never an official part of the group I mentioned, which included future convicted Death Eaters like Rosier, Mulciber, and Avery. But he was on their periphery, rarely participating directly in their bullying but regularly supplying them with new curses and potions he'd found or invented. He was a very brilliant young man, though somewhat vindictive, especially towards James and Sirius." Remus paused. "It didn't help that your father took



a strong dislike to Snape literally from the first day they met on the Hogwarts Express. Jealousy over Snape's friendship with your mother, I suppose. How is he as a teacher?"

Jim shrugged. "Kind of a jerk to be honest. He hates me and is happy to let me know it every class. On the bright side, Mum tutors me in Potions during the Summer break, and she's pretty confident I'll be able to pull an O on my OWL even though I'm barely getting A's in Snape's class."

Suddenly, Jim looked a bit embarrassed. "I called him Snivellus during my very first Potions class. Dad sort of encouraged me to do it if I thought he was treating me unfairly."

"Mm-hmm," said Remus who was torn between being scandalized and amused. "And how did that work out for you?"

"Lost a lot of points. My whole house got mad at me. Professor McGonagall and Mum both got mad at me. I ended up in the Headmaster's office with both my parents. It ... was a bad day."

Jim looked around the room, suddenly uninterested in maintaining eye contact. He still owed Snape an apology since, alas, he didn't die in the Chamber of Secrets when he was supposed to and thus leave Harry to deliver it for him posthumously. Then, his attention was drawn to the other picture which Remus had deliberately placed on the wall next to the one of the Marauders. He looked around again. There were no other pictures on any of the walls.

"So ... the Marauders. Did any of *them* become animagi?"

Remus gave Jim a funny look as he took a sip from his tea cup. "Why, Jim, whatever would make you ask a question like that?"

"Well, for one thing, you've got a picture of the Marauders on the wall next to a picture of three animals standing around in front of the Whomping Willow. And I'm pretty sure you don't normally see a rat perched on the head of a stag that's calmly standing next to a grim."

"Well, Jim, *you* might suspect that those animals are actually transformed animagi, but I couldn't possibly speculate on such things," Remus said with an odd smile.

Jim sat for several seconds while quietly considering Remus's peculiar statement. Suddenly, he really wished Harry was with him because he was certain his older twin would instantly understand the subtext. Then, it hit him – at least three of the Marauders actually had become animagi, and Remus had sworn an oath not to reveal it, one he was now trying to work around.

"Well, then," Jim said slowly. "Speaking *hypothetically*, if those three animals *were* animagi and also Marauders, how would I be able to tell who was who?"

"An interesting question. All animagi have Tells in their animal forms – markers that give a hint as to their true identities. Perhaps you could try examining the picture more closely."

With that, Remus rose and went to a nearby drawer from which he produced a magnifying glass that he handed off to the boy. Intrigued, Jim studied the photo of the three animals more carefully through the glass. After a moment, he let out a gasp. Though it was hard to tell with the animals moving around, he was certain that the majestic

stag had tiny circles around each of its eyes, circles that reminded him of his father's glasses that were so similar to the ones he wore himself. Then, he studied the rat that had attached itself to the stag's antlers and noticed that there was a thick patch of hair on the back of the rat's head that reminded him of the unfortunate mullet that his teenage godfather was wearing in the other photo.

"If I had to guess, I'd say that the stag was James Potter and the rat was Peter Pettigrew."

"And the grim?"

Jim studied it for a few minutes carefully and finally noticed that the grim had pale gray eyes unlike Lupin's green ones. "That's Sirius Black."

Remus laughed. "Well done! And as a reward for guessing properly, I will now answer any specific questions you have about how the Marauders became animagi, since I am no longer bound by that silly Unbreakable Vow we all swore as Third Years."

Jim did a double-take. "You swore an Unbreakable Vow?"

"Yes, to never reveal to anyone else the fact that James, Peter, and Sirius were animagi."

"But you just told me!"

"No, I did not. I simply left some clues laying about that you were able to use to deduce the truth."

Jim stared at Remus for several seconds in confusion until the man finally grinned at him.

"It was a *very* poorly drafted Unbreakable Vow, as it turned out. A foolish venture for thirteen-year-old boys to engage in, though probably not in the top ten most foolish things we did while at Hogwarts."

The boy accepted that with some difficulty. *An Unbreakable Vow? While they were just thirteen?* And he thought his own exploits so far had been ridiculous. Jim shook his head to clear it.

"So why did my dad end up a stag and my godfather a rat?"

"The animagus doesn't choose his form. Magic does. In so choosing, Magic is guided by a number of factors, many of which are not easily categorized. It is known that family history, personality, and even one's own name play a role. Sirius's surname was Black, and his given name was derived from the brightest star in the constellation Canis Major, a star which is also known as the Dog Star. So Magic decided that his spirit animal would be a large black dog. Peter's connections were more nebulous, but the name Pettigrew, which suggests "little" and "grow" when viewed symbolically, implies that his spirit animal would be something relatively small. That said, he was rather stout at that age. If Peter had been small and thin instead, it's entirely possible that his spirit animal would have been much bigger since his human form would be the small one that grew to a larger size."

"For what it's worth, it looks like Uncle Pete has lost weight since then. And gotten a much better haircut." Jim glanced back to the picture of the animals and focused on the stag. "And my dad?"

"James was an interesting case. He had the toughest time mastering the transformation despite the fact that he was a

prodigy at Transfiguration. He had no personal symbolic connections to any animals. Not even the Potter coat of arms had any animal-themed heraldry that might have forged a connection. He was on the verge of giving up when he had a breakthrough from a remarkable and unexpected source – Lily Evans!"

"My Mum? Did she become an animagus?"

"Not to my knowledge. *But* a few months into our Fifth Year, Lily mastered the Patronus Charm because she'd heard it would be worth a great many points on our DADA OWLs, and her Patronus manifested as a beautiful silvery doe. And then, not a week later, James overcame his block and was able to transform into his stag form."

That information astounded the boy. "Wait a minute. My dad was only able to become an animagus after he figured out what form would most impress my mum?!"

"An oversimplification, but not much of one. James had been deeply infatuated with Lily since the day they met, but it was completely one-sided. *Toe-rag* was her favored nickname for James until Sixth Year when she finally consented to go out on a date with him, and over the next two years she overcame her animosity and came to care for him a great deal. I think learning that Lily's Patronus was a doe – and one's Patronus and animagus form overlap more often than not – caused James to subconsciously believe that a form which was in some way mated to her spirit animal might bridge the gap between them. Since they *did* end up getting married, who's to say he wasn't right."

Jim seemed almost dazed by all that. He'd always viewed his father – Lord Potter for as long as he'd been alive – as such

a dominant figure in his life. It was startling to realize the extent to which he'd once followed his mother around like a love-sick puppy.

"So what's your animagus form? And why aren't you in the picture? Or do I have to guess that too?"

Remus grew more serious and took another sip of tea before setting his cup down. Then, he rubbed his hands together nervously, surprising himself with his sudden tension. It had been a long time, after all, since he'd actually had to admit his secret to anyone else who didn't already know it from some other source.

"I'm not in the second picture, Jim, because I was the one who took it. And I don't have an animagus form of my own." He took a deep breath. "I can't have one ... because being an animagus and being a werewolf are mutually exclusive."

Jim froze. "Erp?" he finally said.

"Yes, Jim. I am a werewolf. I was bitten at the age of four by Fenrir Greyback on the night of the full moon, and I have transformed every full moon since. Your father figured out my secret when we were Third Years. That was the impetus for him, Sirius, and Peter to become animagi because all animagi are immune to lycanthropy. In fact, a transformed werewolf will not even attack an animagus whether in human or animal form unless provoked, and if the animagus's form is large enough and imposing enough, it's actually possible for the animagus to *herd* a werewolf away from potential victims."

There was a lengthy silence.

"You're ... a werewolf," Jim finally said while swallowing hard. "And you were a werewolf at Hogwarts and my dad

knows all about it." Remus nodded yes. "Does my mom know?"

"Yes. Actually, she was the very first to figure it out though she never told a soul, not even your father who figured it out on his own. Dumbledore and the Hogwarts teachers, of course, all knew before I started school. Being a Muggleborn, Lily associated the signs of lycanthropy I displayed, mainly always being sick on the day after the full moon, with what she knew of werewolves from Muggle films and books. She didn't realize that the most well-known characteristic of true werewolves was the one I lacked - a violent and homicidal disposition even when not transformed. And since I *did* lack that characteristic, all of my classmates other than Lily and eventually James, Sirius, and Peter completely discounted the possibility of my being a werewolf."

"Because you *weren't* a violent homicidal maniac?" Jim asked with a tight voice.

"Correct," said Remus simply.

"Uh-huh. That's ... that's good to know, I guess. And how many people here at Shamballa know you're ... you know?"

"Oh, several dozen I should think, though they're all quite protective of my privacy. Albus Dumbldore arranged for my introduction to the city's leaders, and the Kampo Rimpoche - he's the leader of the monastery that took me in - has known from the start. The monks all ensure that I'm locked up tight on the nights of the full moon and that I receive proper treatment when I wake up the next day. You see Jim, I came to this place in the hopes that the Four-Fold Path of Enlightenment might be the key to controlling my changes, and the monks were just as eager to see if their techniques

could help me. So far, they haven't, but both the monks and healers who watch over me still have hope, as do I. More importantly, though, the Path has brought me the serenity to accept my condition even as I continue to study and research and meditate and do everything else I can to overcome that affliction. I have been a werewolf for twenty-nine years, Jim, and while transformed I have never taken a human life nor caused injury to any human other than myself." He held out his scarred arms. "These scars are from my youth, from those days when the Beast was angry that I would never let it take control. Nowadays, I don't even eat *meat* anymore, and I can feel the Beast sulking bitterly every time I dig into a bowl of rice, but it can do nothing more to harm me or anyone else."

Jim crooked an eyebrow at that. Remus smiled back at him bashfully.

"Well, so long as I remain contained on that one night of the month anyway. I don't know why I alone seem immune to the spiritual corruption that accompanies the curse of lycanthropy. If I knew, I'd bottle it in a heartbeat and offer it up to save all those others who've been lost to this foul condition. But after nearly three decades, I still have no explanation. So I do what I can as a teacher and advisor to those who need either teaching or advice. And now that I've told you the truth, you can decide whether you still want to learn from me. Despite my earlier hostility, I tell you know that I am eager to teach you how to become an animagus and anything else you want to learn. Because you are the son of my former friends. Because you are the godson of one who I hope is *still* my friend. And because you are the brother of someone who I regret not being able to raise as my own. But most of all, because you have come to me for learning and I am a teacher. So, do you still want to learn what I have to show you?"



Jim looked at the former Marauder for a long time as he processed everything Lupin had said. Then, he took a deep breath and summoned his Gryffindor courage. "When do we start?"

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## ***15 DAYS UNTIL AZKABAN***

### Chapter End Notes

AN 1: It was almost cruel, I know, to have Peter Pettigrew be the one to say "Always" (and especially since he was completely insincere), but Snape doesn't have that motivation anymore and anyway it was so delicious a subversion that I couldn't resist.

AN 2: Considering how deeply traumatized Remus is by his Lycanthropy and how full of self-loathing he is in canon over being a werewolf, I am really the first to think that the Marauders were kind of assholes for giving him the nickname Mooney?

AN 3: It always bugged me that fiery strong-willed Lily would develop a Patronus that was just the female version of James's stag. So I thought it would be fun to flip the script. Lily got her doe Patronus first (very minor spoiler: the doe's name is Faline, which was Bambi's girlfriend), and then her admirer/stalker James claimed a stag as his spirit animal in response.

AN 4: An unusual number of people over the last few months have been asking complicated questions in Guest reviews on FF.Net. Please sign up for an account and leave reviews I can respond to or else IM me. I generally do not respond to Guest reviews in Author Notes and will never do so if it's potentially a spoiler.

# Prelude (Ron)

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## CHAPTER 5: Ron Weasley and the Secret of the Naga

**4 July 1993**

3:00 p.m. (local time)

Healer Gupta Baskar's Office

The Temple of Healing, Shamballa

Ron sat quietly in the healer's office and tried not to show his nervousness. He was a Gryffindor, after all, and if he couldn't stop himself from being afraid, he could at least try not to show it. Jim had given him a look of quiet encouragement as the two passed by one another a few minutes before. Apparently, Jim's "examination" had gone well. Of course, Jim hadn't experienced months of possession by the teen-aged specter of a not-so-deceased Dark Lord, so Ron was less optimistic about his own mental health.

Healer Baskar had explained the process patiently before commencing. He would look into Ron's eyes and through them into Ron's mind and soul. He reassured Ron that he was under a Healer's Oath and would not reveal any of Ron's personal secrets without his consent, but unlike with Jim (to whom the healer had given advice on how to hide deeply personal matters), Baskar made it clear that he would need to fully inspect Ron's psyche to determine if Tom Riddle had damaged him in any way and, more importantly, whether any vestige of Tom Riddle still remained. With that in mind, it was a rather tense ten

minutes that Ron spent quietly staring into the deep piercing eyes of the mind healer.

Finally, Baskar leaned back in his chair and blinked rapidly for a few seconds. "Well, Mr. Weasley, let us get the most pressing matter out of the way. I am quite confident that there is only one mind inside your head, and it is indubitably yours. I see no signs that the Riddle persona has any active presence at all within your mind."

Ron almost smiled when the subtext hit him. "Active?" he said with a swallow. "What about ... inactive?"

Baskar sighed. "I'm sorry, Mr. Weasley. To be 100% honest, I do see ... remnants of the Riddle spirit. Faint signs of the psychic architecture it created over the course of several months. I believe that they will fade over time, but they are still present right now." He paused and then frowned. "To be honest, your case is most unusual. Indeed, probably unique. I have participated in many exorcisms and in both the destruction of possessing spirits and the treatment of former possession victims. But as far as I am aware, yours is the only case in which the possessing spirit was completely destroyed while still in the act of maintaining the possession instead of being removed first. I suspect that is how you acquired your Parseltongue abilities which otherwise can only be acquired either through genetic inheritance or years of study. It is possible that you may have gained other benefits from this experience And, to be blunt, perhaps some negative traits as well. But I see no signs of such now and no evidence that this residual architecture is in any way detrimental to you."

Ron was quiet for several seconds. "Speaking purely hypothetically, if ... if Tom Riddle came back somehow, could he affect me? Control me?"

Baskar's eyes widened in surprise. "My understanding was that the Tom Riddle entity was a residual soul fragment from a man who had died many years before. Do you have reason to think Riddle is still alive? Or exists in some spiritual form more powerful than his diary-self?"

Ron hesitated. Tom Riddle was the true name of Voldemort, and he definitely still existed ... sort of. Jim had told Ron everything he knew about what had happened down in the Chamber of Secrets. But Riddle's connection to Voldemort was still protected by the Fidelius Charm, and when the diary that had served as Secret Keeper was destroyed, Jim and Harry Potter jointly became the new Secret Keepers since they were the only ones (as far as anyone knew) who had been told the Secret directly by its previous Keeper. The two brothers had been advised to remain silent for now by Dumbledore and Rufus Scrimgeour, but even if they hadn't, Ron himself *couldn't* tell anyone else because he *wasn't* the Secret Keeper.

"Like I said," he finally answered, "*hypothetically*."

"Hmm," Baskar replied with Ron thought might be a hint of suspicion. "Well then, *hypothetically* I honestly don't know. There is no precedent I'm aware of for a *living* person to possess someone in this manner. There might be some sort of of inchoate connection, but I could not guess what form it might take if it became active. I can only counsel you to strive to maintain constant awareness of your own thought patterns. Your Wu Xi Do studies should help with that. But at the moment, I can say categorically that I perceive no indications of any foreign thoughts affecting your own."

Ron relaxed visibly at that.

"So with that out of the way," Baskar continued. "Let's talk about what Tom Riddle did to you and how he could affect you so deeply. Possession takes many forms: from periods of total control which you would perceive as blackouts to periods when you were still in control of yourself but were influenced on a more subtle level. Your memories indicate that initially Riddle relied on the latter. That is, you remained self-aware most of the time but were the subject of powerful emotional bursts that overcame your reason and caused you to act in ways that Riddle desired."

Ron nodded but said nothing.

"I bring this up now, Mr Weasley, because I think it is important for you to understand one thing. The things you said or did while under Riddle's influence *were not your fault*. I know people have undoubtedly told you that, but it is clear from my assessment of your mental state that you don't quite believe it. You remember *those* events. You remember saying and doing those damaging things. And Riddle's influence was too subtle for you to realize that the emotions you felt which led you to say and do those things were unnatural. So it is understandable that you would feel guilt for those things even though you were not truly at fault. I promise you, Mr. Weasley – viewing your memories from an external perspective, I can clearly see when the unnatural emotional forces came into play and overcame your reason. My goal for our next several sessions will be to work through your memories together so that I can point out to you those occasions when your will was overcome and help you to understand why you acted as you did and why you should not feel responsible for it. This will be a lengthy procedure, but for today, let us take one particular instance and examine it together."

Ron sat impassively for a moment. "Okay," he finally said. "Where do you want to start?"

"At the beginning. The first time your memories clearly show the signs of external influence was last September on the first day of classes at Hogwarts. Your mother sent you a Howler." Baskar frowned. "Very nasty those. I remember students getting them from my own time at Hogwarts. But I digress. You immediately felt feelings of embarrassment and shame, but I could also detect the emerging influence of Riddle as he reconfigured those emotions into feelings of resentment towards your family and especially towards your younger sister, Ginny."

The boy's forehead furrowed at that. "Why would Riddle want to turn me against Ginny?"

"Oh, I doubt he cared about her at all. He was still feeling you out at that point. Working to find which buttons he could push to provoke a response in you. Sibling rivalry and latent feelings of jealousy towards a younger sister, and especially one you perceive as being favored, are perfectly natural for a young person of your age and background. But Riddle heightened those normal feelings into a deep paranoia which resulted in that unpleasant confrontation between you and your sister later that night. You became openly resentful towards her because of the idea that had been put into your head suggesting that your parents only had so many children due to a desire for a daughter and that this was the reason for a perceived neglect of you by them. Now then, compare how you felt that night to how you feel now. Do you still believe that your parents only had you because they were holding out for a girl no matter how many pregnancies it took?"

The boy blushed deeply and looked away. He sat silently for a long moment. "Did ... did you only look into my memories from when I was possessed?" he finally asked in a quiet voice.

The question surprised Baskar. "Yes. Were there other memories that were relevant to this question?"

Ron took a deep breath and looked back towards the healer. "I *know* that my parents only had me because they were aiming for Ginny. I'm not ... mad about it anymore. I understand why they did what they did. But ... I know for a *fact* that they were holding out for a little girl."

The answer took Baskar aback. "And how would you know that, Mr. Weasley?"

The boy paused and rubbed his fingers across his eyes.

"Because my father told me so."

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**The Hogwarts Infirmary**  
**10 May 1993**  
**9:30 a.m.**

Ron's eyes fluttered open as sunlight streamed down from the Infirmary's windows. He blinked and wiped the sleep from his eyes before looking around the room. It was the morning after Jim had rescued him from the Chamber of Secrets. It was also the morning after he had tried to hurl himself from the Astronomy Tower only for Jim to rescue him a second time. As he looked around, Ron noticed that Jim was lying in the bed opposite his own on the other side of the room still asleep, and he was surprised to see that his father was asleep in a chair next to his bed. At the sound of

Ron moving about, Arthur's eyes fluttered open and he smiled at his youngest son.

"Ah, good morning, son," Arthur said quietly but warmly. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay, I guess," Ron said. "Where's Mum? I'd have figured that she'd be here and you'd be at work."

"I took a few days off so that I could be here with you as well. Your mother's here, but she stepped out to grab some breakfast from the kitchens." Arthur paused and grimaced slightly. "You, um, ... you gave us a bit of a scare last night, son."

Ron didn't respond to that. When he and Jim had returned to the hospital the previous night, they'd made up a story about how Ron had just "stepped out for some fresh air" and Jim had come with him. It seemed obvious that no one believed them, but everyone was so uncomfortable with the possibility of Ron being suicidal that once Madam Pomfrey put a tracking ward on the boys to make sure they didn't get out of bed without her knowing, the other Weasleys let the matter drop.

The father and son made sparse small talk for a while, but it was obvious that Arthur had something to say. Finally, he pulled out his wand and cast a privacy ward.

"Ron, we need to talk about something. Actually, I suppose we need to talk about a lot of things, but one in particular. Your mother and I had a long talk with your sister and brothers about everything that's been happening this year. And especially with Ginny. It took some doing – I promise you, she did *not* want to go back on her word to you – but she finally told us about that ... *conversation* you two had the night after her Sorting. The one where you talked about



Ludmilla Weasley and about Ginny's seventh birthday party ... and about how you believed that your mother and I set out to have as many children as it took to get a daughter..."

Ron's face reddened in embarrassment. "Dad, that wasn't me. That was the diary talking. It wasn't ..."

"You were right," Arthur interrupted.

" ... what?" the boy said in a small voice.

The man looked down at the floor in embarrassment. Then, after he'd collected himself, he began his tale. After Ludmilla Weasley and Meleager Malfoy ran off together, it began a feud between the houses of Weasley and Malfoy that lasted literally until Lucius and Arthur's handshake the day before. The story handed down from Weasley father to Weasley son was that the Malfoys somehow used forbidden magic to curse the Weasleys into continual ruination. The exact form of ruin varied from generation to generation though the failure to produce any daughters after Ludmilla was common to every surviving Weasley. For Arthur's father, his ruin had been drink. For his grandfather, it had been gambling. Arthur himself carefully avoided those vices other than an occasional galleon spent on the Daily Prophet Prize Draw, but he had struggled continually through school and ended up as the Ministry's resident "expert" on Muggle Affairs simply because Muggle Studies had been a notoriously easy class during his student days and it had been the only NEWT for which he'd scored an O. A Muggle-related job was literally the only form of Ministry employment open to him, particularly since the Death Eaters in those days actively targeted Muggle-philies in the Ministry as blood traitors and so appointment to any office in the Muggle Affairs division was widely considered to be a death sentence. By the time Ron was born, Arthur had risen

to become Assistant Director of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department simply through bloody attrition.

"My father never told me about the family curse until after I'd already married Molly. I told her at once, of course. I figured she'd want to annul the marriage. We hadn't had Bill yet, and she was entitled under those circumstances. But you know your mother – once she sets herself on a course, she won't ever back down. She took her dowry money out of Gringotts and spent it all on a seer who gave her a prophecy about how to break the curse. The seer said that if we had seven children and the last one was a witch, the curse would be broken. So we talked and argued and even shouted a bit before I finally gave in. No matter what it took, we would have seven children even if it meant that we'd struggle financially for all of our lives and theirs. And sure enough, Ginny came in at number seven."

Ron nodded as he absorbed all that. "So Ginny really did break the family curse. That was why you treated...?" He trailed off, suddenly embarrassed at his own jealousy.

"Why we treated her better than you and your brothers? It's alright, Ron. Looking back, I can understand how you'd feel that way, and I am truly sorry for it. But the thing you must understand is this. Your mother and I weren't overprotective of Ginny because we thought she'd broken the curse. It was because we thought she *hadn't*."

Ron stared at his father in confusion, and Arthur closed his eyes for a few seconds as he dredged up painful memories.

"I know you talked with Ginny about her seventh birthday party and about the magic cake with the moving decorations. The ones that showed Jim Potter flying around on a dragon. Well, you see, the truth of it was ...

we *didn't* buy Ginny a magic cake. We couldn't have afforded such a luxury back then. Your mother did those decorations herself, but they were ordinary decorations made from butter cream and food coloring and love. It was *Ginny* who animated the decorations with accidental magic. Her *first* accidental magic."

Ron stared in shock as he considered the implications of a witch who showed no magic before the age of seven.

"Up until that point, Ginny had shown no magic at all. You don't remember it because, well, I supposed because the twins kept you preoccupied – which is another thing we'll be having a family meeting over – but by the time Ginny was five, your mother and I were resigned to the fact that Ginny was most likely a squib. We had to sit down with Bill, Charlie, and later Percy when they started to notice and make them promise not to speak of it until Ginny turned eleven and we'd know for sure. You see, the prophecy Molly had paid for, after all, had only specified that if our seventh child was a *witch*, it would end the curse. I figured that was how the curse had finally ruined me like it did my ancestors – by tricking me into have more children than I could afford in the hopes that it would all magically work out instead of leaving my children destitute. That was the real reason we were so overprotective of Ginny. Your mother loved her cousin Steven dearly, and when the Prewitts sent him away for being as squib, it hurt her a great deal. So we resolved that whatever it took, Ginny would never feel unloved or mistreated on account of her lack of magic."

Suddenly, Arthur's face lit up almost reverentially. "But then, on the morning of her seventh birthday ... it was like a miracle. She had wished for a magic cake ... and the cake *became* magical. Not just magical, but with a complex animation, a continuous transfiguration effect that would

have been hard for NEWT-level students! And she'd done it on accident! Your mother and I were just getting over the shock of that when the school owls arrived with the news that Bill had been made Head Boy and that Charlie was both a Prefect and Quidditch captain. I should have said something then, but I was too overcome with shock. I couldn't quite believe that the curse might be broken just like that. But sure enough, later that afternoon, I got word from Billy McElroy that he was taking retirement and was going to nominate me to take his place as head of the department! Honestly, it was like a dam bursting! All the good fortune our family had been denied for centuries coming to us at once."

Ron stared at his father in amazement as the man continued with a strange urgency. "A few nights later, I told Bill and Charlie everything I just told you. And I told them something else as well. *Don't settle*. For far too long, us Weasleys have had to struggle for everything we could get only to lose it all and have to start all over again. But I truly believe that's over for us now. My children will choose their own futures from now on, and I think you will *all* go on to do great things. *That* is why Bill decided to go work for the goblins as a curse-breaker instead of just settling for a Ministry position. *That* is why Charlie applied for that fellowship with the dragon sanctuary that eventually turned into a full-time job. I was going to tell Percy everything this summer, but I see now that I was wrong. I should have told *all of you* the truth before, but I'm telling you now. Because maybe if you'd known all this a year ago, you might have been better able to fight off that damnable diary. It was my fault for not seeing that you might feel insecure in comparison. I just hope one day you can forgive me for it."

Ron opened his mouth to respond, to reassure his father that he was forgiven, but no words came out.

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***Healer Baskar's Office***  
***3:30 pm (local time)***

"And did you forgive your father?" Baskar asked gently.

"Of course!" Ron said forcefully. "How could I not?!" Baskar crooked an eyebrow at him, and Ron finally sighed and shook his head from side to side. "Yeah, okay. It took a little longer. At first, I was still in shock over everything. But after I got home from school, me and Dad and Mum had another longer talk. This one had a lot of crying and a lot of hugging."

He paused. "My Mum is a big crier ... and an even bigger hugger. Sometimes, that gets annoying, but other times..." His voice trailed off but his smile indicated that sometimes he didn't mind hugs at all. "She even made a point of burning her '*Howler Quill*' right in front of me! I felt sure she'd want to hang onto that at least until the Twins graduated. Since then, we've been fine."

The healer nodded. "And what do you think now of your father's advice that you *don't settle*? Has it changed your career goals?"

Ron shrugged. "I dunno. I honestly didn't have any career goals before that. I'm scraping by in school. I'm passing everything, but it's a struggle. If I weren't pushing myself so hard to try and keep up with Jim, I'd probably be in danger of flunking out."

"What are your favorite classes?"

"Um, Transfiguration, probably. The reading's tough, but there aren't a lot of wand movements to learn like in

Charms and not really any incantations at all. Herbology and Astronomy are okay, I guess."

Baskar studied the boy for a few seconds. Then, he rose and moved over to a bookshelf from which he extracted a old textbook. Flipping the pages as he moved, he returned to his chair and placed the book on the table next to his patient. "Take a look at this Charm for a few seconds and then try to perform it."

Ron looked dubiously back and forth from the Charm description to Baskar's face. The healer offered no guidance, not even to give the spell's name so that Ron would know how to pronounce it. There was a pronunciation guide, but as with his Charms texts back home, Ron thought it was complete gibberish. "Sam-Sara," he said experimentally, as if the incantation were the names of a man and a woman.

"*Sam-SAR-a*. The second syllable is strongest and longest, and it rhymes with *tar* and *mar*."

Ron flushed and tried again. Then, he studied the symbols below the name that described the proper wand movements. He moved his own wand experimentally, trying to match the descriptions in the book, but it was a complicated pattern and the symbols almost seemed to swim before his eyes. Finally, after almost a moment of study, Ron tried the Charm. Nothing happened, and the boy was disappointed but not particularly surprised.

Baskar, who had been watching the boy intently, spoke up. "Try watching me. **SAMSARA**." He executed the wand movements flawlessly, and a small ball of blue light materialized at the tip of his wand. Ron asked him to perform the Charm twice more before trying again himself,

and this time, the same blue light emerged from his own wand.

"Cool. So what does Samsara do? It looks like a Lumos but not as bright."

"Oh, it's not just a light, Mr. Weasley. Samsara is actually a very powerful healing Charm: the Life Support Charm. It allows your wand to act as a direct conduit for your life force. By using the Charm and then touching your wand to another person who is critically injured or otherwise nearly at the point of death, you can use your own life energies to sustain their own, delaying death long enough for proper healing to be applied."

Ron smiled broadly. As dangerous as Jim's life seemed to be, that might be a good spell to know.

"But I had another reason for asking you to learn it, Mr. Weasley. I wanted to see through your eyes how you went about the process of learning a new spell. May I look into your mind again?"

He nodded, and Baskar once again made use of his Legilimency. After just a few seconds, he withdrew from Ron's mind looking satisfied. "As I thought. Mr. Weasley, you suffer from a learning disability."

Ron's brow furrowed at the unfamiliar term. "Yeah, well, I said I wasn't doing well in school. Is 'learning disability' fancy healer-talk for 'dumb'?"

Baskar made a face of mild consternation. "It most certainly is not, Mr. Weasley! On the contrary, my assessment indicates that you are actually quite intelligent but are being sabotaged by a neurological condition that prevents you from properly absorbing information that you read and

study. That much was obvious when I compared how well you performed the Charm after reading the instructions versus how well you did after watching me cast the spell just three times."

"Neuro...logical?" he said somewhat dubiously.

"Yes. Language here in Shamballa unfortunately renders the condition's name as *Uneven Thinking*, a rather inaccurate description based on a translation of a very old Sanskrit name. A healer back in Britain might call it *Mordenkainen's Disjunction*, while Muggle medicine recognizes a similar condition called *dyslexia*. The condition manifests in many different forms, but most often, it interferes with your ability to read or otherwise interpret written symbols. You might find that words and letters reverse themselves or change order. You might have difficulty in pronouncing uncommon words or interpreting the symbols in your textbook that show how to perform wand movements or in comprehending the measurements and preparation times of potion recipes. That is why I asked you to try the Life Support Charm. The written notations of its wand movements contain the sort of complex markings that often trigger dyslexic results and so it's a good diagnostic tool. The condition is very rare among wizard-folk but well-documented. It is also usually an inherited condition. Tell me, Mr. Weasley, do either of your parents display any of the symptoms I've described?"

Ron sat very still as he thought about how his father, supposedly a Ministry expert on Muggle matters, still consistently mispronounced words like *ekeltricity* and *fellytone*. "... maybe?" He said in a very soft voice. "So, um, how do you treat this ... *dixlessia*?"



"Dyslexia. And I'm afraid there is no cure. The condition is a part of your brain's basic wiring. You can no more permanently fix it with a potion or a Charm than you could improve your friend Jim's eyesight so that he wouldn't need glasses. His own body recognizes his vision problems as normal, and so his magic inevitably works to change his body back to its default condition. Dyslexia is the same. *But*, now that we know you have the condition, there are a number of treatment options and techniques to help you stay aware of it and overcome the limitations it places on you."

Ron's mouth quivered a bit, and he quickly wiped his eyes. Suddenly, he vividly remembered every time he'd embarrassed himself by mispronouncing a Charm's incantation. Every time he'd ruined a potion because he'd somehow misunderstood the instructions on Snape's blackboard. The way it had taken him six tries to properly say *Wingardium Leviosa* (and if it had been anyone else but Jim who'd finally corrected him, he'd have probably exploded in frustration). The idea shook him to the core – after all these years, was it really possible that he wasn't actually ... *stupid*?

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***6 July 1993***

***The Weasley Burrow***

"And what, *pray tell*, does a Ministry auror want with one of my sons?" Molly Weasley asked in a cold voice as she fixed Auror Proudfoot with a glare that would have been worthy of Alastor Moody himself.

For his part, Proudfoot grimaced nervously and adjusted his collar. It seemed obvious that he was fresh from the Academy, and if he was so visibly intimidated by an angry

mother, one might wonder how he'd ever handle an actual dark wizard.

"I assure you, Madam Weasley..."

"*Mrs.* Weasley!"

"Ah, yes, right! Mrs. Weasley, of course! Well, I assure you that your son George has done nothing wrong. I just have a few questions for him about the work he was doing for Gilderoy Lockhart. You see, Lockhart himself may be stuck for life in the Janus Thickey Ward at St. Mungo's, but the Ministry is still interested in finding out exactly what he was up to. And in the course of the investigation, it was brought to our attention that he might have provided your son with..." Proudfoot paused and took a deep breath. "...explosive runes."

"HE WHAT?!" Molly shrieked so loudly that despite himself the young auror took two steps back. "GEORGE! GET DOWN HERE THIS INSTANT!"

Barely a second later, George Weasley, who had obviously been listening in from upstairs (along with Fred, Percy, and Ginny), came down bearing a nervous expression.

"George!" Molly exclaimed with a tiny bit less fury. "What's this about explosive runes?!"

George swallowed. "Well, Mum, I was on Lockhart's research team devoted to experimental portkeys, and he gave me a sheet of explosive runes to study. He wanted to see if you could reconfigure them to supercharge a portkey so that it could penetrate anti-portkey wards."

"Explosive runes!" Molly huffed, her hands on her hips. "To a Fourth Year!" Proudfoot winced slightly at the woman's

fury.

"Mum, I was careful with them and nothing bad happened."  
George paused at that. Inwardly, he thought to himself  
*"Well, nothing other than my possessed little brother  
stealing a copy and using it to try to kill people, but I  
reckon I shouldn't mention that in front of the auror."*

Then, before Molly could get started again, George barreled forward. "And to be honest, it's a good thing he did, too! Or else I wouldn't have recognized them with they were used to blow up all the Mandrakes at Hogwarts. Harry Potter would have died in front of me, and me and Fred might well have died with him."

George then cringed at Molly's shocked expression. He'd forgotten that with all the confusion surrounding Ron's possession, the family had not spent much time discussing his own brush with death, and his mother was only now realizing how narrowly he escaped. Luckily, Proudfoot stepped in to divert her.

"I've read the report on how you saved young Potter, Mr. Weasley. It was very impressive. You're a credit to Gryffindor." The boy smiled and ducked his head at the praise.

"However," the man continued, "I'm afraid the Ministry cannot allow such dangerous spell materials to remain in the hands of a minor. If you still have the runic array Lockhart gave you, I must ask you to turn it over to me along with any notes you may have."

George's smile faded, and he actually looked a bit crestfallen. For a second, he considered lying, but respect for the title of auror won out. "Yes sir. They're up in my

room, locked up in my trunk. Do you want my solution as well?"

Proudfoot blinked twice. "Your ... solution?"

"For how to convert an explosive rune into a ward slicer. I kept working on it even after I got home." He coughed delicately. "I, um, get bored easily."

The auror nodded slowly. "Yes, I think I'd better have that as well."

George turned and bounded up the stairs. While he was gone, Proudfoot studied the cozy Burrow while resolutely ignoring the suspicious and hostile glare the overprotective Weasley mother directed towards her son's interrogator. About a minute later, George returned and handed him a stack of carefully arranged papers.

"That's all of it," he said with a hint of sadness.

"Thank you." The auror paused. "And you actually think you've solved the problem Lockhart set for you?"

The boy shrugged. "Well, obviously I can't rightly test it. And I still think it would be kind of unstable and would probably cause a discharge of some kind, so don't try it while standing next to your gran's china cabinet. But yeah, I'm pretty confident."

Proudfoot smiled. "I look forward to what the boys in the research division have to say." He looked back and forth between Molly and George. "Given the nature of this research and its possible criminal applications, I must ask that you not discuss your work on this project with anyone else."

George nodded while Molly said nothing. Finally, his presence no longer needed, Proudfoot showed himself out and headed down the lane to the edge of the wards so that he could apparate. Once he was outside the Burrow's wards, he pulled out George's notes and his runic solution and spent a few minutes studying them. As he did, his naive expression melted away to a more thoughtful demeanor, and for just a second, his blue eyes turned gray.

"Ah, Mr. Weasley. You always were my favorite student." And then, with a soft pop, "*Auror Proudfoot*" apparated away.

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**10 July 1993**

5:00 a.m.

The Kumar Towers Hotel

Shamballa

Jim Potter's eyes fluttered open as the early light of dawn came in through the window of the hotel room he shared with his best friend. He rolled over and noticed that Ron's bed was empty. Immediately, Jim sat up and saw that the door to the balcony was open. The boy's eyes widened and a cold fear clenched his heart. Quietly, he got out of bed and crept to the balcony door. To his relief, Ron was there but nowhere near the ledge as Jim had feared. Instead, he was standing in the middle of the large balcony in his pajamas and facing the rising sun as he went through the relaxation kata that Padma had taught him the prior week and to Ron just days before. Ron was not yet as proficient with it as Jim, but he was learning fast.

"Well isn't this a sight," Jim said. "Usually, I'm the one dragging you out of bed for early morning workouts. What brought this on?"

"Couldn't sleep," Ron said simply. "Bad dreams. Thought this might help."

"And has it?" Jim asked as he stepped out onto the cool balcony and took his place by Ron's side, easily falling into the rhythm of the Water Aspect kata.

"Yeah, actually. I've been doing this for about five minutes or so, and I already feel less like vomiting from terror."

Jim winced. "That bad?"

"It was the '*spiders crawling up my throat*' dream again. Pretty sure that's as bad as it gets. Healer Baskar says we'll try to work on my arachnophobia while we're here if there's time, but obviously all the Voldemort stuff I went through takes priority."

Jim nodded. "You, uh, haven't talked much about that since we got here. You know you can always talk to me, right? I mean, no matter what happened last year, we'll always be best mates."

Ron said nothing at first, but then after a few seconds, he suddenly paused his kata and then turned to face Jim.

"I've still got bits of Voldemort in my head," he said without preamble. Startled, Jim dropped his own kata and turned towards Ron, his eyes wide.

"Baskar told you that?" he asked. Ron nodded.

"There's not enough there now to do anything, at least as far as Baskar can tell. But ... if Voldemort ever returns completely, there's ... there's a chance he could influence me or affect me somehow. You're my best mate too, Jim. But I want you to promise me..."

"Ron," Jim tried to interrupt.

"No, Jim," Ron said forcefully. "I want you to *promise* me that if you think I'm under his influence, you won't hold back just because we're friends. You can't. There's too much at stake."

Jim took a deep breath as he considered his friend's words. "Okay, I promise. But only on one condition. *You* have to promise that you will never stop fighting him. That you will do everything you can to not let him control you or influence you."

Ron smiled. "Deal."

Jim relaxed and the two returned to their morning kata. After a few seconds, a calmer Ron spoke again. "Speaking of doing everything I can to get better, I've been thinking. We should bite the broomstick and join Granger's study group this year if she'll still have us. Or better yet, get her to tutor us individually. I think I may need some extra help."

"Oh?" Jim said, surprised once again.

"Yeah," Ron said as he swayed back in forth in a motion that he refused to call serpentine. "Tell me – have you ever heard of something called *dyslexia*?"

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***15 July 1993***  
***The Weasley Burrow***

"Mum, the excavation is at an especially delicate point right now," Bill Weasley said earnestly to Molly through the green flames of the Weasley Floo. "I can't just pop up and come back home for a few days just for a party."

"Really, Bill? How odd! I floored your supervisor to see if he could get you a message out in the field. Martin Pepperwinkle. Wonderful fellow. I was a bridesmaid for his daughter, Eudora. Did you know that? Anyway, he said the most dangerous part of your current dig was wrapping up and that he was planning on giving everyone on your team ten days holiday for ... R&R? Is that the right term? In fact, I could have sworn that he'd also said something about how he'd already mentioned that to you. He said that you were excited to have some time off to take your '*new lady friend*' off for a week to some island off the coast of Greece where nobody ever wears clothes. But that can't be right, Bill, because I'm sure if you had a new lady friend you'd have told me about it in one of those letters you never find time to send home."

And with that, Molly Weasley actually *smiled* at her eldest son through the Floo connection. Bill closed his eyes and put two fingers up to his forehead as if to push the approaching aneurysm back into place. "Mum, she's not a ... lady friend. We're just friends from work, and we're going on holiday together."

"Well, Bill, you say she's a friend, and she's a '*she*' which means a woman. I certainly *hope* she's a lady, though this whole '*naked island*' thing gives me pause." Then, her eyes widened with excitement. "I know! If you can't make it home for Ron's homecoming party, you can bring your lady friend home for *Christmas*. We can introduce her to everyone, and I'll get out all the scrapbooks of you growing up. I'm sure she'll love the one of you when you were a wee baby rolling around on that bearskin rug! And you won't even have any need to feel embarrassed that you were naked in that picture since she'll have already seen everything!"



Bill sighed in defeat. "When's the party?"

"Ron comes home on the 30th and we'll have a surprise party ready for him. Then, we'll all go to the Potters as a family for Jim's birthday party the next day. On the 2nd, you can either portkey back to Cairo or straight to whichever naked island you desire."

Bill's eyes goggled a bit. "You're remarkably blase about ... naked islands."

Molly shrugged. "You're a grown man, and I made sure you know contraceptive Charms. I've ... had an object lesson recently on the dangers of being an overbearing busybody of a mother." Then, she looked away while blinking rapidly.

"Mum," Bill said gently. "What happened to Ron was in no way your fault."

She paused before responding. "Bill, you can't imagine... When he woke up in the Infirmary after ... William, he *screamed* when he saw us! Like he just knew we all hated him and he couldn't bear the sight of us judging him. It may have been the fault of Gilderoy Lockhart and You-Know-Who, but I played my part. And so did your father. And so did all of us. That's why your father and I want all of us to be here for Ron. So he *knows* that we're all family and we all love one another. And if that requires me to hector my eldest into coming home for just a few days so that the boy who idolizes him can remember what he looks like..."

Bill laughed and raised his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay. I'll come. Mind you, international port-keys are a bit pricey."

"Oh, did I forget to mention? Your father won 700 galleons in the Daily Prophet Prize Draw. We considered just using that money to visit *you* in Cairo, but since Ron's off to India,

we thought it unfair to go without him. So we're using that money to buy new wands for all the children who are still using starter wands that they got out of the Prewett vaults. Maybe a pet for each of them, too." She paused and frowned. "Oh, and better brooms for everyone... including Ginny."

"Uh-huh. I still can't believe you're letting her try out for Quidditch."

"Like I said. I'm going to try hard to stop being one of *those* parents. I spent too much time fretting over your decisions and Charlie's. With everything that's happened, I don't have it in me to worry myself to death over my children doing risky things, particularly when I know perfectly well that they're all going to go behind my back and do what they want anyway." Then, she sniffed almost diffidently. "Not that I won't be having *words* with Charlie about teaching Ginny to fly unsupervised in the middle of the night without our permission, mind you."

Bill laughed again.

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### ***Meanwhile, outside...***

Percy was in the shed helping his father tinker with the Anglia while Ginny and the Twins degnomed the garden. At first, the Twins were surprised - amazed, actually - when Molly put Ginny on gnome detail with them. It was the first time she'd ever been given the chore. But their mother explained that Ginny had proven herself able to get into as much mischief as any of her brothers, so it was foolish to take it easy on her just because she was a girl. Ginny's initial pride in her mother's new sentiment lasted right up until the first time a gnome bit her on the finger.

Percy, who knew nothing about engines, was in charge of handing Arthur various tools out of the man's aggressively Muggle toolbox when requested. Although not a devotee of Muggle culture like his father, the boy was a quick learner and had reached the point where he could identify most of the tools in the box by name and function. Nevertheless, he was off his game today, as Arthur noted when Percy handed him a sledge hammer instead of the adjustable spanner he'd requested.

"Percy, you won't make the Hogwarts letter get here any faster by worrying yourself to death over it. To be honest, I asked you to help me with this to get your mind *off* of it."

"Well, you know me," the teenager said ruefully. "Perfect Prefect Percy. Everything I've done has led me to one moment where the whole rest of my life will be decided by one little envelope with a tiny silver medallion in it."

"Son, I promise you. The whole rest of your life will *not* be decided on the basis of whether you're made Head Boy. I firmly believe that you can achieve whatever you want out of life whether you get that honor or not. And your mother and I will be just as proud of you either way."

Percy started to answer but was then distracted what he now saw through the window of the shed: the quartet of Hogwarts owls he'd been expecting for days now approaching from the north. He glanced out the open shed door and saw that the Twins and Ginny were still engrossed with the gnomes. Cautiously, he moved around to the side of the house to intercept the owl meant for him without his siblings seeing. Arthur casually followed behind. It was silly, Percy knew, but whether he got the Head Boy position or not, the boy wanted to have a moment by himself to absorb

the news since he was sure the Twins would tease him relentlessly either way.

The owl landed on a nearby fence post, and held out its talon with the Hogwarts letter attached. Nervously, Percy removed the letter, and the owl flew away. He tore the envelope open and turned it upside down to let the contents fall into his hand.

It was a standard Gryffindor prefect's badge, identical to the one he'd worn for the last two years.

Percy closed his eyes and exhaled the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Then, he felt his father reach out and put a consoling hand on his shoulder.

"Oh, Percy, I'm so sorry."

The boy opened his eyes to look at his father, and to Arthur's surprise, he actually smiled, if halfheartedly.

"It's okay, Dad. Really, it's ... okay. To be honest, I kind of expected this." He pulled out the letter that came with the badge and was unsurprised to learn that Bobby Lattimer of Hufflepuff would be the new Head Boy instead of him. The other boy had, after all, won his House a hundred points by calmly following instructions to protect the school instead of tearing off with an angry mob, thereby putting even more students in danger.

"Bobby's a fine fellow and a credit to the school. He'll do a good job. And without the added hassle of being Head Boy, maybe I'll have an easier time with my NEWTs."

"Percy, I'm sure it wasn't just a snap judgment Albus made based on how you responded to that Chamber of Secrets business."

Percy laughed. "Dad! Of course it was! And I can't really blame him. When push came to shove, I knew what I was supposed to do, but I let my emotions get the best of me, and I made the wrong call."

"You were worried about your brother, son. There's no shame in that."

"I know, but that doesn't change the fact that *I made the wrong call*," Percy said calmly but firmly and surprisingly without much bitterness. "I don't just mean by failing to follow instructions and Hogwarts procedures. I mean I *objectively* made the wrong decision because if I'd *succeeded* in capturing and detaining Jim Potter, he wouldn't have made it to the Chamber of Secrets *in time to save Ron*. Ron would have died, You-Know-Who would have returned, he'd have probably massacred half the school, *and it would have been all my fault!*"

With that, Percy's sudden energy faded and he leaned his back against the wall of the Burrow as if to draw strength from his family home. "And do you want to know the craziest bit, Dad? If I ever find myself in a similar situation again ... I'll probably do the same thing. Which is *why* I have no business being the Head Boy if I can't put family loyalty aside when I've accepted a higher duty."

"Percy," Arthur said gently. "You love your family. There's no shame in that."

"We all love the family, Dad. But ... I think I've spent too much time in love with *The Family*." He emphasized the last two words with deliberate pomposity. "I was in love with the idea of the Noble House of Weasley instead of the actual family members who belong to it. Since I was a kid, I've dreamed about restoring the family name. Getting us back

in the Wizengamot. That sort of thing. And since I first became a prefect, I think I've begun to resent the family members who seemed like ... obstacles to that goal. Bill and Charlie for running off to follow their bliss when they maybe could have done more to build up the family's fortunes here in Britain. George and Fred for ... well, being George and Fred. And ..." He paused and looked up shamefacedly at Arthur, who simply smiled indulgently at him.

"And your duffer of a father with his silly Muggle obsessions?"

Percy laughed and shook his head. "You are the best dad any wizard or witch could hope for. And I'm a bloody fool for not realizing it sooner." He looked back down at the Prefect's badge. "I'm ... glad I'm not Head Boy. Disappointed, of course, but also glad. I ... I think I've been headed down the wrong path for a while now. And being Head Boy would have only carried me farther along it."

Arthur pulled his son who was becoming a man into a tight hug that Percy returned happily ... right up until they were both startled by the loud shrieks from around the corner. They raced around to see what the commotion was but then stopped short and gawked in astonishment.

For in the garden, they could see the Twins, both of them staring in mute horror and amazement (and in Fred's case, *maybe* a touch of betrayed anger) at the crimson and gold Prefect's badge that George held delicately between two fingers as if it had come dipped in a deadly poison.

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**24 June 1993**

**The Naga Cultural Center and Ski Resort  
(20 miles north of Shamballa)**

Lily Potter looked up in wonder at the thirty-foot behemoth than loomed over her. The creature had the body of an enormous snake, most of which was coiled to support its massive weight. Its torso made up less than a fourth of its total length but was marked by *six* lithe and sinewy arms. Two hands were joined in prayer or supplication of some kind while the other four were outstretched into what Lily assumed were occult mudras. But the most striking feature was the monster's head. Noseless, hairless, and clearly serpentine, it reminded Lily disturbingly of Voldemort's face from the last time she saw him at Godric's Hollow. The Dark Lord had, for some mad reason, used dark magic to transform himself into a hideous snake-man, though whether it was to secure the loyalty of his many Slytherin supporters, to terrify his enemies, or for some other occult purpose, no one knew. Lily shuddered once more at the sight, and the only reason the huge creature wasn't even more terrifying was that it was simply a statue. Specifically, it was a giant stone statue representing a mythical creature known as a *naga*.

Remus Lupin, who was acting as her tour guide at the moment, noticed her reaction. "It reminds you of *him*, doesn't it? I had the same reaction when I first came here for a visit."

Over the last few weeks, their mutual proximity to Jim had essentially forced Lily and Remus to at least be civil to one another, and while Remus still held a grudge on Harry's behalf, speaking with Lily had reminded the man of the friendship they had once shared. In time, civility blossomed into cordiality. It helped when Lily admitted to him that if Harry had shown magic at any point during his childhood, her plan had been to transfer custody to Remus who would raise him abroad until he was old enough to attend Beauxbatons under a false name. Now that he better

understood Lily's somewhat obsessive desire to separate Harry from the public's obsession with the Boy-Who-Lived (and the attendant risk of Death Eaters targeting Harry), Remus thought her decision to send the boy to the Dursleys when he seemed to be a squib made a bit more sense, although he was still appalled that neither Lily nor James had ever checked up on him and that the Dursleys were even more awful as he'd expected.

On this day, as Jim and Ron started their last week at Shamballa before returning to Britain, Remus and Baskar had both decided to give the pair a day off from study to explore one of the region's more unusual cultural experiences. In part, it was because Healer Baskar was attending a Healer's Conference in Jakarta, but he agreed with Remus that the boys had worked hard and were entitled to down time. A weekend spent skiing would be perfect, to say nothing of the wonders of the Naga Caves. A hundred years earlier, wizards from Shamballa discovered the large cave network that had been hidden by the Himalayan ice since time immemorial. Within, they discovered ancient hieroglyphics that depicted a forgotten race of snake men that came to be known as the naga (after the legendary talking snakes of Indian Muggle mythology). Although he had no proof of it, Baskar was convinced that the site had some connection to the origins of Parseltongue, and he was quite curious to learn what two apparently natural Parselmouths thought of it.

The caves themselves were a minor curiosity until the 1930's, when the 9th Kumar Pasha (the grandfather of Parvati's fiancé) became enamored of Muggle skiing. Finding the slopes near caves to be ideal for that purpose, he had a private ski lodge built nearby which his son, who was a wizarding hotelier among other ventures, later expanded into a posh resort hotel for wizards who enjoyed



skiing and other winter sports. By associating his resort with the nearby Naga Caves, the current head of the Kumar family was able to obtain certain concessions from the Shamballa city government, one of which was that the largest piece of naga statuary found within the caves would be relocated to the lobby of his opulent resort.

"Were there actual naga at one point?" Lily asked. "I don't remember covering them in Care of Magical Creatures."

"We didn't. And no one truly knows if they were real or not. The word itself is simply Sanskrit for '*snake*.' The Naga Caves were rediscovered in 1891 – they had a big fete two years ago for the Centennial – but they're old enough to predate the founding of Shamballa itself. Whether they were originally created by a now-extinct species of human-animal hybrid, that is, the snake equivalent of centaurs and veela, or by some forgotten tribe of ancient humans who simply venerated snakes is unknown. Probably the later, since a serpentine race would most likely be cold-blooded and unlikely to make its home in the Himalayas. Either way, the ones who decorated the caves probably weren't wizarding-folk. There are no signs that the builders of the caves used any magic we know of in their construction." He paused and looked back up at massive bronze statue.

"Which only makes it more astonishing that they could move something that massive halfway up one of the world's tallest mountains."

"Do you agree with Healer Baskar that there's a connection between the naga and Parseltongue?"

Remus shrugged. "Possibly. But the ones who built the caves left hieroglyphics that have not yet been fully translated, and anyway, that tells us nothing about their

spoken language. Unless definitive proof is found somehow, there's no real way of knowing."

Lily nodded before looking back up at the colossus standing before her. She shuddered again.

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Meanwhile, a few miles away from the hotel, Ron walked carefully down the dim and somewhat spooky pathways of the Naga Caves, pausing every now and then to study the strange serpentine markings etched onto the cave walls that were illuminated by glowing spheres every few feet. With him were Jim, Padma, Pavarti, and Sanjeev Kumar, Pavarti's fiancé who had arranged the excursion. The two boys had spent the morning learning to ski, which Ron had found surprisingly enjoyable, but now they were taking a break for a tour of the famous cave system while letting their lunch digest. While the tour was rather interesting to the two young Parselmouths, Ron and Jim's initial impression of Sanjeev as being "the Indian Draco Malfoy" was confirmed. In particular, the older boy apparently viewed the cave and everything in it as essentially his family's property rather than ancient artifacts to be admired for their inherent cultural value. Ron eventually started to entertain himself by counting the number of times Sanjeev said "my father" in the course of their tour, but he lost count somewhere around twenty. They were also less than impressed with the exceptionally gaudy ruby ring which he presented to Parvati but which apparently had been sized incorrectly and kept sliding off the girl's finger. Padma visibly loathed the boy, and while he appeared not to notice, Pavarti was increasingly annoyed by her sister's attitude.

By now, the group had entered a large open chamber which Sanjeev identified as "the Grand Balcony," a level

outcropping of stone that stuck out over a deep chasm some fifty feet across and twice as deep. On the far side, illuminated by glow spheres suspended from the ceiling, was a sheer granite cliff face onto which had been carved a magnificent and enormous bas relief of the same six-armed naga whose statue now stood in the lobby of the ski lodge. Surrounding the great naga were hundreds of other snakes carved into the wall in an ornate interlocking design. The edge of the balcony had been roped off to prevent anyone from falling over the edge, and there were other signs of recent construction work, including the caution tape and a "Do Not Enter" sign which Sanjeev had simply pushed aside before leading the group into the chamber.

"One of my father's companies is doing some renovations to the Caves," Sanjeev explained loftily. "For safety purposes. There was some minor structural damage caused when the great naga statue was relocated from this chamber to the lodge."

Padma muttered something under her breath about the propriety of relocating an artifact that had stood unmolested for millennia to serve as a decoration for a hotel lobby, and Ron and Jim both fought down smirks. Pavarti glared at her twin, while Sanjeev was distracted by one of his father's employees who had entered the chamber to speak with him. From what Ron could hear, the conversation consisted of the worker insisting that the chamber was off-limits for safety reasons followed by variations on "*Do you know who my father is?*" from Sanjeev. Finally, Sanjeev called out to Parvati, saying that he needed to speak with the site manager but would return in a few minutes. As soon as Sanjeev and the worker left the chamber, Parvati whirled on Padma in anger.

"What is *wrong* with you?! You've been horrible to Sanjeev all day!"

"Oh I don't know, sister. Perhaps I'm just irritated to see you hanging all over that spoiled child like some bauble he purchased at a village fair!"

"How dare you speak about the Pashazada like that!"

"The Pasha-what?" Ron interrupted suddenly.

"Pashazada," Parvati said. "It means '*the Pasha's son*.'"

Ron nodded. "Okay. Can you also explain what a Pasha is? 'Cause I've been wondering that since we got to India."

"Me too, actually," said Jim, "but I've been too embarrassed to ask."

"That's okay, Ron," Padma said drily. "It's just a meaningless courtesy title."

Parvati gasped. "PADMA!"

Her sister shrugged. "It is! '*Pasha*' was an honorific title given to generals and governors in the Ottoman Empire, as well as to private individuals who had done something to please the Sultan. Over *four hundred years ago*, back before the Statute of Secrecy, one of Sanjeev's ancestors performed some service for the Sultan of that era. No one even remembers what it was! But he was awarded the title of Pasha which has been handed down from father to son ever since. Even after the Statute of Secrecy meant that the Kumar Pasha couldn't use that title in front of Muggles. Even after the Ottoman Empire *ceased to exist some seventy years ago*! But they still call themselves Pasha and Pashazada because they think it sounds more impressive

than '*elitist prats*.' And everyone just goes along with it because they're *so bloody rich*!"

Ron and Jim glanced at one another nervously as months, perhaps years, of suppressed anger between the Patil sisters finally erupted in front of them. Quietly, they took a few steps back and contemplated whether to wait outside the chamber rather than continue to witness the scene.

"SO THAT'S IT!" Parvati shrieked. "This isn't about cultural respect or courtesy titles! I'm engaged to a billionaire's son and you're JEALOUS!" As she spat out the accusation, Parvati gestured wildly towards her sister, causing her expensive but oversized ring to fly off her finger and skitter across the cavern floor. She gasped in horror as it rolled to a halt right at the edge of the chasm before falling onto its side. Then, she gave her sister another furious look before storming over past the rope barrier to where the ring had landed.

"I swear, Padma, if that had gone over the edge, I'd have sent you right after it," she spat as she bent over to pick up the gaudy jewelry.

Padma snorted. "I'd like to see you try!"

For their part, Ron and Jim were still paralyzed with discomfort and wondering if they were about to have to break up a fight between the two girls. It would have been better for all concerned if that had been the case, for at that moment, Parvati jerked back up and whirled around to shout something back to Padma when her foot slid on some loose dirt and gravel at the landing's edge. The girl lost her balance and fell, barely grasping the edge of the balcony while letting out a shriek.

"PARVATI!" Padma screamed, while Ron looked on in horror.

"*Sssshit!*" Jim, in his surprise, actually hissed out the expletive in Parseltongue, as he desperately fumbled for his wand beneath multiple layers of heavy winter clothing. He'd thought about getting a wand holster of his own but resisted the idea as being "too Harry." At this moment, he cursed himself for that sentiment as Parvati lost her grip and fell before he could get his wand out to catch her. Padma screamed again, and all three children rushed to the edge of the balcony with Ron and Jim holding Padma back so she didn't fall over after her sister. The bottom of the chasm was shrouded in darkness. Jim finally got his wand out and cast a Lumos Maxima. Parvati's body looked terribly broken, but to the trio's amazement, there seemed to be signs of life.

"PARVATI!" Padma called out again, tears streaming down her face. Jim looked around for some way to get down to the injured girl. Seeing none, he looked up and spotted the secure metal posts from which the light globes were suspended.

"***CARPE RETRACTUM!***" With a flash, a sturdy rope shot out of the tip of Jim's wand and wrapped itself securely around one of the posts. Then, to Ron's shock, the Boy-Who-Lived stepped off the balcony himself and swung out to the middle of the gap before willing the rope to slowly extend itself and lower him down to the ground below. Realizing what his friend had done, Ron rose and prepared to cast the same spell, when Padma grabbed his arm.

"Take me with you!" she said urgently.

"I, ah, don't know if ..." Ron sputtered.

"*Please! She's my sister!*"

Ron scrunched his eyes up for a second and then let out a loud sigh. "Grab round my neck. I need both hands to hold onto the wand."

The girl did as instructed while Ron focused his attention on another of the light posts.

"*Pleasedon'tbreakpleasedon'tbreakpleasedon'tbreak...*" he thought urgently before casting Carpe Retractum and then swinging off into the chasm with Padma Patil hanging on for dear life. Slowly, the two of them lowered down to the cave floor where Jim was already performing the diagnostic spell on Parvati.

"She's alive," he said. "But she's badly hurt, and I don't know if we know any spells that will save her." He looked back down at the unconscious girl and took a deep breath.

"***EPISSSSKEY!***" he hissed, hoping that the only Parselmagic healing spell he knew might do some good. Parvati's body twitched slightly and some of her smaller wounds closed, but she did not regain consciousness.

Ron thought for a moment and bit his lower lip in nervousness. "Let me try something. ***SAMSARA.***" His wand lit up with a soft blue light, and he touched the top of it to Parvati's forehead. Her breathing became stronger and less labored.

"What spell is that?" Jim asked in surprise.

Ron kept his eyes closed in concentration. "Life Support Charm. It'll keep her stable until you get help. But *hurry*. I've never actually done this on a person before and I don't know how long I can hold it."

Jim nodded before jumping back up. He fired off another retracting cable to the overhead lights, one that pulled him

all the way up to the ceiling. Then, grabbing hold of the light post with one hand, he dispelled that rope before firing another one to a light over the balcony that he used to swing over.

"Hang on, Ron! I'll be back as soon as I can!" he yelled down as he ran off in search of medical assistance.

Down below, Padma was holding onto her sister's hand while weeping uncontrollably. "Please, Parvati. Be okay. I'm sorry for what I said. For everything."

Ron focused as best he could on maintaining the life force connection forged by the Samsara Charm. But it was a difficult Charm to maintain and the spell was not one with which he'd had much (or really any) experience. After nearly a minute, his concentration finally broke, and Parvati's breathing once more grew labored and ragged. He cast the spell a second time, but it was less effective and only lasted for about thirty seconds before breaking. His third try lasted only for ten seconds, and his head began to swim from the strain.

"I'm sorry..." he said in a thick voice. Padma seemed to ignore him as she wept over her dying sister. Ron's own eyes teared up as well, not only at the impending death of a fellow Gryffindor but also at the symbolism of the scene in front of him. Padma, influenced by jealousy, had lashed out at her sister, and disaster had followed. He could relate. Ron looked down at the unconscious girl and imagined George or Fred or even Ginny lying in her place. Then, he closed his eyes and cast his memory back to the previous week.

*It was a Tuesday. Jim was off on one of his private lessons with Brother Chandra, so Ron spent the afternoon one-on-*



*one with Healer Baskar, working on various healing spells that could be augmented with Parselmagic. As Ron reviewed the list, he suddenly noticed an absence.*

*"I don't see Samsara on here. Does Parseltongue not work with it?"*

*"Very perceptive, Mr. Weasley. The Life Support Charm is indeed susceptible to Parselmagic. But think about what that would mean if you used it in such a fashion. Samsara functions by linking the life forces of the caster and an injured person, allowing life energy to flow directly from one to another. So if we boost the spell's normal effects with Parselmagic...?"*

*Ron thought for a moment. "You could transfer more life energy than you intended! How dangerous would that be to the caster?"*

*"Very. I've only attempted the Parselmagic version of Samsara once to save someone at the very brink of death, but even with years of experience, I was barely able to keep my very life from draining away in the spell."*

Ron thought about Baskar's warning, but in the end, it didn't matter. A young girl, a friend, was dying in front of him, and he (maybe) had the power to save her. He knew what was easy and what was right. And he knew what he had to do. Ron took a deep breath, focused his attention on the tip of his wand, and hissed. "**SSSSSAMSSSSARA.**" Instead of a soft blue glow from his wand tip, he was rewarded with a brilliant white light. Immediately, he touched his wand to Parvati whose entire body went rigid and was enveloped in a halo so bright that Padma had to look away.

Then, Padma's concern for her sister was overcome by a sudden wave of terror as the hundreds of snakes carved into the great wall above her, as well as the great naga they surrounded, all *hissed* in unison in response to the boy's actions. Outside the chamber, Jim had only just passed the news of Parvati's injury to Sanjeev when the various snake symbols and carvings on the nearby cave walls also hissed as one, their message filling the boy with dread. After practically yelling at Sanjeev and the workers to summon a healer, he raced back towards the chamber where he had left his best friend behind. Meanwhile, miles away, Lily, Remus, and the other guests at the ski lodge were equally as startled and amazed when a deep and terrible hissing sound bellowed forth from the mammoth naga statue in the hotel's lobby.

Down in the chasm, the light from Ron's wand grew brighter and brighter until Parvati's whole body shook violently as the worst of her wounds and broken bones healed instantly. Her eyes shot open and she sucked in air with a loud gasp. Padma cried out and embraced her twin in a fierce hug. Parvati hissed in pain – Ron's spell had only brought her back from the brink of death and had not healed her completely, but she was just as relieved to be alive as her sister was to witness it. Only after Parvati reassured Padma that she was okay did the two girls glance over at Ron and become shocked at his appearance. The boy was as white as a sheet, more pale than any person they'd ever seen. His head was bobbing, and his wand trembled violently in his hand.

"...worked?" he asked in a shaky whisper. "S'good." Then, his eyes rolled back up into his head and he fell over onto the floor, unconscious or worse.

"Ron!" Jim cried out to his friend from the balcony up above. Padma looked up at him and did a double-take. She'd never seen the Boy-Who-Lived so frightened. She could not possibly have known why, for other than Ron, Jim Potter was the only person who had heard the terrible hissing that rose up in response to Ron's spell and understood what the snakes of the Naga Caves had said.

*"Your sacrifice has been accepted."*

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### ***Elsewhere...***

After an unknown time, Ron's eyes suddenly opened and he sat up and looked around. He saw nothing but darkness, but he could feel his wand still in his hand, so he held it aloft and cried out "**LUMOSSSSS.**" The boy was actually surprised that the spell came out as Parselmagic, for he had not intended to hiss. He was even more surprised when, instead of a soft light from the tip of his wand, there was a bright light coming from above that completely illuminated the area in which he found himself. He looked around again and was amazed (and somewhat alarmed) to realize he had been transported somewhere else. Possibly to some other part of the Naga Caves, but for some reason he doubted it.

The chamber seem impossibly large. Roughly twenty feet in every direction stood a massive stone column, five feet in diameter and adorned with a snake made of some precious metal that wrapped around each column before disappearing into a thick mist far above the floor. The mist was luminescent and was the source of the light that manifested in response to his Parselmagic Lumos. Not all of the mist though; the glowing part was limited to a rough circle centered on Ron. The columns themselves seemed endless and formed a regular grid, one every twenty feet at

right angles, as far as the eye could see. "As far as the eye could see" actually meant about a hundred feet in every direction, as the glow from the mist did not penetrate the darkness beyond that.

Ron stood up and yelled. "Hello?! Is anybody out there?!" There was no response, so the boy picked a direction and started walking. He soon noticed that the aura of light followed him. After an indeterminate time (truly indeterminate - the boy tried to cast Tempus, but the spell refused to function, even when he hissed it in Parseltongue), Ron suddenly developed the strong feeling that he was being watched, or at least observed somehow. Soon after, however, that nagging sensation was washed away by a more important concern, for Ron suddenly heard a voice. It was Jim Potter calling for help from somewhere in the distance!

Ron took off in a run, but soon he skidded to a halt, transfixed by what lay ahead: still more impossible tall columns, but these were marked by a familiar yet terrifying sight. Webs. Lots and lots of webs. More than the boy had ever seen in his life. The Twins had told him scary stories before he started Hogwarts about the Forbidden Forest and the acromantula colony within it. Even those tales, as embellished as they must have been, were not as disturbing as the forest of spider webs that lay before him. And somewhere within, Ron could still hear Jim weakly calling for his aid. Ron swallowed fearfully and then raised his wand.

"**LACERO!**" A knife-blade of magical force sliced cleanly through the nearest web. After a few more cutting curses, a path began to clear through the webbing. But Ron's efforts also alerted the inhabitants to his presence, for soon, huge spiders - no, acromantulas! - came down from whatever

was above and beyond the mists, crawling down the columns and the webs that connected them. Instinctively, Ron took a step back, but another frightened cry from Jim stiffened his resolve, and he raised his wand again.

**"LACERO! ARANA EXUMAI! LACERO! STUPIFY!"** The boy threw spells faster than he ever had before, but more and more acromantulas came down to replace their fallen brethren. And each new wave included larger spiders than the one before. Now shaking in fear, Ron nearly faltered, but another cry from his friend somewhere beyond the webbing stiffened his resolve. He knew he was outnumbered, but then he thought of something to even the odds.

**"SSSSERPENTSSSSORTIA!"** The boy nearly staggered under the power of the Parselmagic spell as it erupted from his wand. There was a flash of light, and then suddenly nearly a dozen vipers materialized and practically flew through the air towards the acromantulas. *"Attack the sssspiders! Sssstrike at them all!"* His viper servants obeyed without question, tearing at the deadly spiders and giving Ron some breathing room. Emboldened, he returned to attacking the web itself. He had avoided using fire spells for fear that the flames might spread and endanger Jim and himself, but the sheer number of spiders attacking led him to abandon that restraint. As more and more of the foul creatures fell to his magic, he became less afraid of them and more ... *incensed* by their attacks.

**"INCENDIO!"** The webbing caught fire easily but luckily did not start an inferno. The spiders climbing down through the webs instead fell down to the waiting fangs of the vipers, and when their numbers started to fall, Ron conjured more snakes to bolster them and added his own

attacks to those of his serpent-fighters. "**LACERO!  
DEPULSO! LACERO! FLIPPENDO TRIO!**"

Finally, he had fought his way to the center of the webbing and found Jim on the floor wrapped up tightly in webbing.

"Jim! Jim! Can you hear me?!" The boy seemed to still be alive but paralyzed and in pain. He had a number of bite marks on his skin. Suddenly, Ron *sensed* rather than heard the arrival of something behind him. Something *big*. The boy jumped up and whirled around just in time to see the largest spider he'd ever seen, ever *imagined*, lower itself to the ground in an eerie unnatural silence. Hagrid had told Ron and Jim all about his friend Aragog, the spider-king of the acromantula colony in the Forbidden Forest. This looked even bigger. Ron wasn't sure if the monster could even fit inside the Gryffindor common room even if it were some how possible to get it through the doors. And then, the foul thing *spoke*...

*"Run, boy. You are no match for me. And you will not deprive me and my children of their meal. Run now, and I will let you live."*

Ron's eyes narrowed as he realized that Jim was the meal the monster was talking about. The old wave of fear he'd felt since he was a child every time he saw a spider rose up once more. The wave that had turned into a tsunami after Tom Riddle's spider-themed tortures. But this time something was different. This time he was all that stood between the Boy-Who-Lived and certain death. For the first time, Ron felt that wave of fear crash against something unyielding and resolute ... and for once, the wave of fear fell short.

"You want Jim?" Ron asked in a fury. "I'll see you in HELL first!" And then he raised his wand aloft.

**"INCCCCCENDIO"** he hissed in a fury of Parselmagic, and white-hot flames practically exploded from his wand to engulf the acromantula and its spawn. The boy spun around where he stood, ensuring that the waves of fire washed over the spiders in every direction. Finally, Ron released his spell. The flames dissipated, and Ron fell to his knees, nearly exhausted. But he knew there was no time to rest. Who knew how many more spiders were still around! Shaking off his exhaustion, the boy pulled himself up to his feet and scanned the room with his wand.

There were no more spiders. Indeed, there were no signs that there had ever been spiders or webs or even vipers summoned through Ron's magic. And there was no sign of Jim Potter either. Then, Ron jerked around in surprise with his wand still ready for battle. For somewhere nearby, Ron could hear the sound of someone clapping, along with the oddly familiar sound of some large creature *slithering* towards him.

"Well done, Child of Man," came a deep sibilant voice from deeper within the maze.

"Who's there?!" Ron yelled out. "What have you done with Jim?! And what is this place?!"

"Your friend was never here, Child of Man." The voice drew nearer, and finally, Ron saw its source shimmer into existence out of thin air not thirty feet from where he stood. The form was certainly familiar, as Ron had seen its image all over the caves today. The creature – no, the *being* – was at least thirty feet long from the top of his bald head to the tip of his serpent's tail. Three-quarters of his body was given over to the form of a massive snake, while the rest

was a scaly torso with six arms and a head that resembled a man's save for the brilliant green scales and other serpentine features.

"Those you fought, like the one you fought to protect, were never truly here but were merely constructs drawn from your mind to test you. As for your other question. I am Sardeth, Last of the Naga. I bid you welcome, Ronald Weasley. This is the last citadel of my race. This is my home... and my prison."

Ron swallowed and tightened his grip on his wand. The snake-man was quite near and now towered at least ten feet over him. "Prison? And, um, what exactly are you in prison *for*?"

Sardeth smiled in a way that Ron thought showed too many teeth. "Hubris, Child of Man. I am the last of the naga ... because I *annihilated* all the others.

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### ***The Temple of Healing Shamballa***

Jim stood at the foot of Ron's bed staring down morosely at his friend, with Lily and Remus behind him. It had been less than an hour since healers had transported Ron and the others back to Shamballa and the Temple of Healing. Miraculously, Parvati was almost completely recovered from what should have been a mortal injury, but Ron was still comatose and deathly pale. The healers muttered about his low body temperature and heart rate and his apparent lack of any brain activity. Word had been sent to Gupta Baskar who would be arriving from Jakarta by portkey at any time, but there seemed to be genuine concern as to whether the boy would last that long.



"It's all my fault," Jim whispered.

Lily looked at him sharply. "Jim, that's utter nonsense. You did nothing to cause Parvati to fall and nothing to cause Ron to use a spell beyond his capability to save her."

"Mum, Ron wouldn't even be here if I hadn't pressured him into coming. He'd be safe at home at the Burrow with his family. Instead, he's ..." Jim's voice broke and he wiped a few tears from his eyes. "Have anyone even contacted the Weasleys yet?"

"No," said Remus. "Healer Baskar will be here soon to give his diagnosis. Then, if Ron's condition seems unlikely to change, we'll contact his family."

Jim shook his head. "They'll hate me forever for this. And they'll be right to."

"Enough, Jim," Remus interrupted. "Focus on your training. The Third Step Exercise."

"You want me to leave and go practice my martial arts?" Jim said incredulously.

"No," Remus said as he placed his hand on the boy's shoulder. "I want you to close your eyes and imagine that you are in the training room going through your kata. You've reached the point where sense memory can be as effective as actually performing the moves. Everything you've been working on with Wu Xi Do for the last few weeks has been for the purpose of strengthening your emotional control, has it not?"

Jim made a face, but then, he closed his eyes and imagined himself back in the training room. After a few seconds, he could feel himself mentally going through the relaxation

katas, and the strain and unhappiness faded somewhat from his face. Then, his eyes jerked open as the doors to the infirmary burst open. Healer Baskar had returned. After barely acknowledging the others, he sat down beside Ron on his bed and pried his eyes open so that he could properly scan the boy with Legilimency. After a long moment, he let go of Ron's head and slowly stood.

"Remarkable," he said in a soft voice. Then, he turned to Jim and the others with a confused expression. "This may seem a foolish question, my friends, but is there any possibility that Mr. Weasley was attacked by a Dementor down in the cave?"

Jim, Remus, and Lily looked back and forth in surprise at the odd question. For his part, Jim didn't really even know what a Dementor was other than a creature that served as guard at Azkaban and occasionally as the Ministry's executioners.

"As far as we've been able to tell, Ron collapsed after using the Samsara Charm in conjunction with Parseltongue," Remus said. "Why would you think a Dementor was involved?"

Baskar looked back and forth between Ron and the others with a pensive expression. "Because I can say with authority that Mr. Weasley's mind and body are both perfectly fine... but at the moment, it appears as though his soul has been removed from his body!"

---

### ***Elsewhere ...***

At Sardeth's confession, Ron tensed and pointed his wand up at the towering naga. Sardeth merely smiled.

"Be at peace, Child of Man. I mean you no harm."

"I kinda doubt that since you just confessed to killing off your own people *and* you sent an army of illusory killer spiders after me."

The naga laughed with a soft *ki-ki-ki*. "It was not I who summoned the spiders. It was the magic of this place. Before any visitor may speak with me and seek my knowledge, they must first make a sacrifice and then pass a test. The nature of the test varies from visitor to visitor, but in your case, it required you to overcome your greatest fear in defense of another. The only spiders in my domain are the ones you brought with you concealed deep in the recesses of your own mind. I commend you for the bravery you showed in defeating them, though I must warn you against pushing yourself to such extremes when you return from whence you came. We are much closer to the source of Magic than you have ever been, and your spells are more potent here than they would be within the World of Man."

Ron considered that. "You said something about a sacrifice. I don't recall sacrificing anything to come here."

Sardeth laughed again in his strange sibilant way. "Yes. I must confess that I found the whole thing quite amusing. There have been many who have quested their way towards here only to be stymied by an inability to find the proper occult sacrifice that would open the spiritual door to this place. And now, a child has done so completely by accident simply through his willingness to sacrifice his own life in order to save another by means of a spell cast in the language of my people."

The boy did a double-take. It was only then that he realized he and Sardeth had been speaking Parseltongue this whole

time. "The language of... You mean Parseltongue? That's actually the language of the naga?"

Sardeth nodded almost proudly. "The word *naga* is a human word for my kind even though no human has ever encountered one of us in the flesh. Our own name for our species was *Paar'zheal* which simply meant '*the people*.' The first human to find his way here returned with the gift of our language which he called Parseltongue. And so that word passed into the vocabulary of your race." As Sardeth spoke, he slithered casually back and forth while gesturing with his many arms in a manner that strangely reminded Ron of how some of his professors gestured when lecturing. "The word '*naga*' was one imposed by human wizards upon us when they sought to understand our mysteries through the lens of human mythology. It is the way of this realm to be shaped by belief and consensus, and so I accept *naga* as yet another name for my kind."

By this point, Ron had begun to relax. "The first human named your language Parseltongue? By any chance was that a bloke named Salazar Slytherin?"

"No, it was an ancient Egyptian wizard who your history books call Imhotep. But I have been visited by the one you speak of. As a young man, Salazar Slytherin taught himself the language of the Paar'zheal but with incredible difficulty as he had only the written texts of others to learn from. He feared that Parseltongue might become completely lost over time without a fresh supply of speakers, and so he asked for it to become a birthright to be passed down to his heirs and preserved forever. I granted his wish. Regrettably, I later realized that I had shortchanged the man. I knew little of human-kind then. I did yet not comprehend the concept of 'gender' since my own people reproduced asexually and I had never met a female human

at that point. As a result, the magic I used to grant Slytherin's wish caused Parseltongue to pass down only among his male descendants." Sardeth shrugged, which Ron thought was an odd motion from someone with six arms. "These things happen when one steps beyond Reality in pursuit of one's desires. Precision is important when dealing with the Wild."

Ron didn't know how to respond to that so he changed subjects. "So people come here to get magical blessings from you and then go back. Does that mean I'm not trapped here or anything?"

"Of course not, child," the naga said almost genially. "You are free to leave whenever you wish, though the magic of my prison compels me to grant you some boon simply for coming here."

Ron nodded as he absorbed that. "Yeah, your ... prison. If you don't mind me asking, how exactly did you end up killing all the naga. Or all the Paar'zheal, I guess."

"Either term is appropriate now. And I killed no one. My race was undone by my actions, but there was no harmful intent on my part. Indeed, I foolishly thought that my plans would benefit all Paar'zheal. Back then, I was considered the greatest wizard among the naga, admired far and wide for my wisdom and power. But my heart chafed at how delineations of power tore at our society. Among the naga, there were powerful wizards, weak wizards, and the children of wizards who had no magic at all. This led to much social strife as the strong inevitably abused the weak who just as inevitably rose up with superior numbers against the strong. I judged this wrong, and in my arrogance, I sought to ensure that all naga should be equal in the blessings of Magic."

"What did you do?" Ron asked.

"I used forbidden rites to take myself beyond the gates of our world. Past the guildhalls of the Lares. Past the graveyards where the first gods slumbered fitfully in their tombs. Out, out into the deepest parts of the Wild from whence both the root and heart of Magic came. And there, I performed the greatest Working in the history of the Paar'zheal. I cast a spell that made our very *language* inherently magical. There would be no more need for wand or cauldron or carefully mastered incantation. The naga would speak his desire and by his will and word alone it would come to pass." He laughed again, though bitterly this time. "My people did not last a day."

"What happened?"

"Like all sentient beings, the Paar'zheal carried within themselves the capacity for self-destruction. Impetuousness when not trained to discipline and cruelty when not constrained by law or custom. Given limitless transformative power, they did not hesitate to use it for frivolous purposes or to revenge themselves on others over trivial slights. Irem, the City of 10,000 Pillars, was shattered unto ruin by what started as a disagreement over a bar tab. In the great Necropolis of Kemet, where we committed our dead to the Great Beyond, a grieving naga's wish to see his dead hatchlings once more brought forth a plague of what you would describe as inferi. The island of Mu sank beneath the waves so swiftly that I didn't even have time to learn whose ill-considered words doomed it. So it was in every city on every continent. Reality strained and then buckled and then came close to utter collapse before Magic came forth to judge us and found us lacking. And so, the Paar'zheal were undone. A great fire fell from the sky unleashing a conflagration that touched every inch of the

world, and when it had passed, I alone remained to tell the story of the naga to those rare few who came to seek my blessing. But our cursed dead language echoed in the dreams of human wizards, a few of whom puzzled out its secrets to find their way here through hidden redoubts high atop the Himalayas, deep within the Amazon rainforest, buried beneath the Saharan dunes, or sunken far under the ocean depths. Of those few who have found me, only the one you call Slytherin had the wisdom to ask for something that might benefit others instead of just himself."

Ron thought about that for a few seconds. Then, an unpleasant thought came to him. "Did, um ... by any chance did a wizard named Tom Riddle visit you?"

Sardeth nodded. "He was the last before you. To my surprise, what he wanted most was knowledge of my people and how they fell into oblivion. He had much disdain for humanity, both wizards and non-wizards alike, and so he sought knowledge of how to more fully reject the humanity within himself. I found myself flattered by his admiration for my form, so I provided him with knowledge of rituals which, in time, would transfigure him bodily so as to gain naga features."

"Tom Riddle was a dark wizard. He ... did things to me."

Sardeth shrugged again. "I get so few visitors, Child of Man. Who am I to judge? If Tom Riddle's journey carries him too far into the Wild, perhaps he will join me here and I might have a companion for eternity."

Ron considered that but decided not to pursue the line of inquiry. "How long have you been here?"

"A difficult question to answer, I fear. Time in this place does not have a strictly linear progression. The entryways found

by you and my various other supplicants are scattered in time as well as space, and anyway, when I grow weary of my loneliness, I have the means to force myself to slumber away centuries until my next visitor arrives. But to answer your specific question, my Great Working and the resultant destruction of my species occurred approximately three hundred years ago as you humans reckon time."

Ron nodded but then did a double-take. "Wait ... What?! Three hundred years? I'd think that more people would know about the naga if they'd ruled the world just three centuries ago before getting destroyed in a worldwide ball of fire from the heavens."

"You misapprehend my words, Child of Man. When I said that I annihilated all the other naga, I was not referring to all of my peers. I meant *all naga who had ever existed*. The Great Fire which came down from the Heavens did not strike in my own time but rather *tens of millions of years before*. The ancient ancestor creatures whose descendants eventually called themselves the Paar'zheal were exterminated long before any of those ancestors even bore a form such as this one. Before they even knew speech let alone magic. That is the true reason for my banishment into the infinite madness of the Wild, why I am forever barred from the world of my birth. Because I am an impossible anomaly – the last survivor of a race which never existed – and were I to slither back into your world, Reality itself would reject me and undo my existence even as it did my people."

Sardeth laughed again. "You should thank me, Child of Man. It was only after my most primitive ancestors were wiped out that room was made for yours. Tiny rodents who evolved into primates who evolved into men who evolved into wizards. You and your fellow humans are the heirs to



my folly, the beneficiaries of my people's erasure. You have my congratulations."

"Um, thanks. So why don't more people, heck, any people know about this?"

"The human mind is poorly suited for travel into places which are nowhere and no-when. When you leave this place, you will remember little of your sojourn here and nothing of me or the fate of my people. Nothing save perhaps as an unconscious intuition that perhaps there is a reason that forbidden magic is best left ... forbidden."

Ron nodded. "Okay then, since you brought it up, will it be time for me to leave soon?"

"Very soon, child. The rules of my captivity say that I must reward you somehow for winning your way here. What blessing would you ask of me?"

The boy thought, but then, he remembered the lessons he'd been taught by his parents, and this time, there was no cursed diary to make him forget.

"Well no offense, Sardeth, but ... my Mum and Dad kind of taught me when I was growing up that I should be careful about what gifts I accept from strangers ... especially if they're magical creatures who, again no offense, seem a bit creepy."

Sardeth laughed once more. "For what it is worth, child, the thought of a world ruled by hairless mammals is quite disturbing to me as well." Then, Sardeth's serpentine body bent forward until his torso and head were low enough to look Ron in the eye. "Shall I simply look into your heart and grant unto you your heart's fondest wish?"

Ron blinked. "To be Head Boy and Quidditch captain?" he asked lamely.

Sardeth stared deeply into Ron's eyes, and the boy suddenly felt completely exposed, more so than if he were nude. "No, Child of Man. You want something else." Abruptly, the naga leaned back away from Ron. "But it is something I cannot give to you, though I see that for good or ill it will come to you one day regardless. Fate has marked you so. I hope when one day you are granted your desire, you find that it is worth whatever price you pay for it."

The great naga slithered back away from the boy and regarded him less intently. "So, if your fondest wish is beyond my power to grant, what other boon would you desire? I perceive that you are both too wise and too humble to ask for mere power. What other desire drives you?"

Ron thought for a moment and then looked up with sudden excitement. "You said I won't remember anything from here. Can you fix it so that I at least remember fighting off all those spiders? Maybe I won't be afraid of them as much."

Sardeth tilted his head as if studying the boy. Then, he reached forward and touched Ron's forehead with one of his fingertips while the other five arms made various occult gestures.

"It is done. The spiders of your mind are gone, defeated forever by you in psychic combat. Those nightmares at least will trouble you know more."

Ron smiled at that. "Thank you, Sardeth. I'm very grateful."

The naga bowed to Ron. "Go in peace, Child of Man."

And with that, Ron Weasley faded away from the prison-citadel of the Last Naga. Sardeth spent several minutes watching the spot from whence the boy had disappeared, a look of strange sadness on his face.

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### ***The Temple of Healing***

Healer Baskar had only just made his dramatic pronouncement about the apparent loss of Ron's soul when the boy himself proved the healer wrong by gasping loudly and sitting up in bed. Naturally, there were several seconds of pandemonium, including a surprisingly high-pitched scream from Jim and a very loud expletive from Lily Potter, before Baskar yelled out. "SILENCE! You will all get hold of yourselves *this instant* or I will clear you from the ward!"

With that, he sat back down next Ron and conducted another psychic examination. When he was done, he spoke to the boy reassuringly but with an undercurrent of concern. "Tell me, Mr. Weasley. What's the last thing you remember?"

The boy seemed to spend a long moment in thought before finally looking up to the healer with a mild confusion. Truthfully, he had a very strong *impression* of listening to snakes hissing for a long time, but he couldn't give any context to that pseudo-memory. "Um, I remember Parvati falling and not being able to maintain the Samsara Charm on her, so I tried it with Parseltongue." Baskar frowned, and Ron blushed slightly. "I know you said not to, but she was *dying* and I couldn't think of anything else. How is she?"

"Parvati is fine, Mr. Weasley. Quite better for the last hour than you have been." The healer spent a few more minutes

gazing deeply into his patients eyes. "Hmm, despite your ... *condition* over the last hour, you now appear to be in perfect health." And it seemed true, for color was already swiftly returning to Ron's cheeks, and he seemed full of energy. Baskar's eyes narrowed as he continued his Leglimency examination. "Better than before, in fact. Somewhat oddly, it *appears* that you have been completely cured of your arachnophobia!"

Baskar and several other healers spent another hour checking Ron's vitals before finally declaring that he would be kept overnight for observation but otherwise appeared to be in excellent health and should be released in the morning. Lily and Remus soon left, but Jim remained and watched over Ron throughout his medical review. For once, Jim's presence discomfited Ron, as the other boy seemed oddly intense. Possibly even angry. After the healers left, Jim sat down in a chair next to Ron's bed but said nothing at first.

"Jim?" Ron began, but the other boy put up a hand to stop him while he went through another mental calming exercise. Finally, after he'd collected himself, Jim raised a privacy Charm and then spoke.

"What. Were. You. *Thinking*?! Baskar *told you* that the Charm you used could be fatal if used with Parseltongue. And you did it anyway!"

Ron sighed and shook his head. "Jim, Parvati was dying. I had to do something."

"I know. I understand she was dying. What I don't understand is why you decided that it was okay to just ... substitute your life for hers? You have so many people who love you. Why do you value your own life so little?"

"It wasn't like that!"

"Wasn't it?!" Jim's voice rose. "For the last hour, I've felt like I was back on top of the Astronomy Tower only this time I was too late to catch you. All I could think of is '*what will I tell Ron's mother at his funeral?*' This is the *third* time I've watched you almost die since May, and it's killing me. I need to know that you care about yourself enough to *want* to live."

Ron looked down, unable to maintain eye contact at first. "I wasn't trying to kill myself, this time," he said quietly. "I genuinely thought I could heal Parvati and break contact before I got hurt. But I *am* a Gryffindor, Jim. *Do what's right instead of what's easy*. Remember that? I couldn't just ignore a friend dying in front of me and more than ... well, than you could if you'd been there instead of me and known how to cast that spell. You can't expect me to be friends with the Boy-Who-Lived and not want to live up to that standard. You just can't."

Jim stood up, still obviously displeased with his friend. "We'll talk about this more later. But you listen to me, Ronald Bilious Weasley. From now on, you are not allowed to die, do you hear me? I forbid it."

Despite his friend's intense demeanor, Ron laughed. "Orders acknowledged, captain."

Jim sighed. "Chess?"

---

### ***That night...***

Madanapala Patil was a proud man who loved his children. Unfortunately, in Wizarding India and for a wizard of Patil's background, loving one's children often meant making hard

decisions on their behalf. Sometimes even decisions for which those same children might judge their fathers harshly. Ultimately, however, "for the good of the family" were the six magic words that, for good or ill, guided Patil's every action, including his current conversation with his daughter Parvati's future father-in-law.

"It pains me to say so, Madanapala, but I have concerns. *Grave* concerns." The Kumar Pasha was an exceedingly corpulent man, so much so that his jowls flapped as he emphasized the word *grave*. His weight also made the fez on his bald head seem disproportionately tiny, almost to the point of being humorous, not that Patil found anything humorous about the current conversation.

"Certainly," the Pasha continued, "I am pleased that my prospective daughter-in-law survived her fall, though it speaks poorly of her wisdom – not to mention her grace – that she should nearly fall to her death while being given a tour of one of our properties."

Patil winced, not just because of the implied insult to Parvati, but also to the Pasha's use of the word *prospective* rather than the word *future* which had been the word used for their prior conversations over the last few years. Surely the Pasha was not reconsidering the marriage over the day's events?!

Then, as if reading Patil's mind, the Pasha continued. "My concern at the moment is with the Weasley boy and the fact that he single-handedly saved your Parvati at the risk of his own life. I have made inquiries. The Weasleys, while Pure-blooded, are a poverty-stricken family barely able to keep a roof of their heads. Certainly, I had no interest in supporting Britain's most recent Dark Lord, but neither do I have truck with whose magical society condemns

as *blood traitors*. If nothing else, it's bad for business. Accordingly, it troubles me that the House of Patil now owes a life debt to the House of Weasley. The prospect of my Sanjeev *buying into* that life debt through marriage troubles me even more."

Patil opened his mouth to argue but could think of nothing to say. He could mention that Ron Weasley was a confidant of the Boy-Who-Lived, but he was unsure of whether the Pasha, who had never been to Britain, even knew who Jim Potter was. Finally, he gave up and threw himself on the Pasha's mercy.

"What would you have me do, Kumar Pasha?"

"I would have you resolve this life debt situation how ever you can, Honorable Patil. Until you do, the wedding of Sanjeev and Parvati shall be held in abeyance. Handle this, Patil. Whatever it takes."

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### ***The Rookery in Ottery St. Catchpole Sometime earlier***

It was the middle of the night in Britain when Luna Lovegood awoke from a most peculiar dream. She had many strange dreams, most of which she did not recall when she awoke, and already the memories of this one were fading. But for once, she clearly remembered a few details. She was floating through the air in an enormous cavernous space marked by a seemingly infinite number of stone columns. And from somewhere in the distance, she distinctly heard the sound of Ron Weasley talking, or more accurately *hissing*, with someone or something else that hissed back to him. She did not understand hisses herself, but nevertheless, she felt that the hissing conversation

which she could not understand was somehow fraught with import. The dream ended quite abruptly, which was most likely why she was startled into wakefulness and remembered any of it at all.

The girl tried to remember more of the dream but then became distracted when a trio of particularly iridescent nargles flew over her face. For some reason, they glowed more brightly than she was accustomed to, and their colors were even more brilliant than usual. From this, the girl deduced that she must have observed something in her dream which was of incredible importance but which she could not presently understand and which, by morning, she would likely not remember at all. She smiled again at the beauty of her nargles, though she also felt a tinge of sadness because as far as she knew, there were no other heliopaths with whom she could share such beauty. In fact, it seemed that those who became aware of the creatures but who lacked her special gift recoiled from them in disgust. She could never understand why anyone could possibly be disgusted by such beauty simply because its colors could be found nowhere in nature and its shape was non-Euclidean. Then, her confusion over the issue caused a fourth nargle to spring into existence just long enough for her to shrug and decide it didn't matter, thereby causing the fourth creature to fade back into the folds of her thought-space.

"Of course," she said quietly to no one, "if people are so disturbed by the sight of nargles, it's a good thing they can't see wrackspurts."

*Those* creatures were disturbing even to her, which made her glad to think how rarely she generated them within her own thought-space. She often wondered why that was. Was it that she found them unpleasant to see and so naturally



avoided those thoughts which gave rise to them? Or was she simply a naturally serene and gentle person and so was simply untroubled by the kind of thoughts that gave birth to wrackspurts, thus making them less familiar to her than nargles? It was a conundrum, one which immediately caused yet another nargle to manifest. This one dove down at her side, flew underneath her, and came up from the other side, a behavior which Luna found rather unusual for nargles. It was at that point that Luna looked up and noticed for the first time that the ceiling seemed quite close – only two or three feet above her instead of the six or seven to which she was accustomed.

Perplexed, she rolled over and was further surprised to see that she was floating a good four feet above her own bed. And most surprising of all to Luna was the fact that there was a *second* Luna Lovegood still lying in the bed underneath the covers, her eyes twitching as if she were in the midst of a most engrossing dream. Another nargle flickered into existence, and Luna reached out for it only to notice for the first time how strangely translucent her body now seemed to be in addition to its uncharacteristic state of "floatiness."

Luna looked down at her own sleeping body as more and more nargles were born of her confusion. "Well I must say," she finally said to no one, "this is *decidedly* peculiar. Even by *my* standards."

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### ***Elsewhere...***

With the boy sent on his way, the Last of the Naga returned to his den and prepared to slumber once more. He felt (not knew but felt) that he would have at least one more visitor before the turn of the present century. It was quite possible

that it would be Ron Weasley, returning to him once more after he had grown into his power. But the truth of that matter was beyond Sardeth's sight.

The naga slithered around in a circle, coiling his lower snake-body again and again before he laid his upper body down upon the coils. His last conscious thoughts were sad ones, for he quite liked the man-child who had come to visit under such extraordinary circumstances. He was at once entertained by the boy's courage and amused by his charming collection of neuroses. But Sardeth's dominant emotion was sadness over the boy's destiny. For he sensed through the eddies of Fate that one day the young Parselmouth would indeed be blessed with his heart's true desire, with that thing he secretly wanted more than any other blessing the Last Naga could give.

One day, Ron Weasley would save the life of the Boy-Who-Lived, no matter what the cost.

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## ***7 DAYS UNTIL AZKABAN***

### Chapter End Notes

AN 1: I have a good friend whose son has been diagnosed with dyslexia and have spent some time listening to him talk about treatment options for the son. At some point, I was struck by the symptoms of dyslexia as they were explained to me and by Arthur Weasley's inability to correctly pronounce electricity and telephone even though he's implied to be an expert on Muggle culture. Added to this was Ron's famous troubles with pronouncing "Wingardium Leviosa." I mean, come on! How many of us were able to

pronounce those two words perfectly after hearing  
Hermione say them once in the first movie.

# Prelude (Harry)

## CHAPTER 6: Harry Potter and the Supreme Art of War

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***19 July 1993***

Harry Potter opened his eyes and surveyed the Prince's Lair like a potentate studying his court. He was sitting comfortably on the Hydra Throne, and while the nine heads of the Hydra were silent at the moment, that was to be expected. The mahogany table was polished to perfection, and the brass adders atop the six chairs surrounding the table gleamed in the light. Harry turned his head to the right and saw that the silver placards identifying all of the prior Princes were in their proper place. Turning to the left, he saw that the great fireplace was cold, and with but a thought, he lit it up into a roaring blaze that further brightened the room.

Satisfied, the boy turned his attention to the nearest bookshelf and studied the titles. ***Harry's Charms Studies, vol. 1-2. Harry's Collected Transfiguration Insights, vol. 1-2. Harry's Potions Studies, vol. 1-2.*** He read each of the titles that represented his accumulated academic knowledge in turn. Then, he moved on to the more personal volumes. ***Harry's Favorite Recipes*** and ***Harry's Guide to the Perfect Garden*** were right where he expected. But then, he frowned at the next few titles. ***Harry's Worst Nights in the Cupboard. That Time Vernon Broke Harry's Arm. Harry Hunting.*** And a slim but ominous volume simply titled ***SUPPERTIME!***

Despite his best efforts, Harry found it hard to focus on the titles to those volumes, so he turned his attention back to the academic section, only to frown ever harder when those titles began to change. ***Harry's Crahms Sutdies. Harry's Cloletced Trisnfagarutoin Insihgst.*** The remaining academic volumes were completely unintelligible.

"No," Harry said firmly, as if willing the words to unscramble themselves. Then, his attention was diverted by movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned to face the front only to realize that the great table and the six chairs surrounding it had disappeared, leaving the Prince's Lair nearly empty.

"No!" Harry said more urgently and with mounting frustration. Then, the Hydra Throne abruptly disappeared out from under him.

"NOO-oof!" Harry yelled out in surprise as he was suddenly and rudely deposited onto the bare floor of the now bare chamber, banging his head on the floor as he fell backwards. He hissed out an angry sigh and then closed his eyes.

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Harry Potter opened his eyes and saw overhead the familiar ceiling of his room in Longbottom Manor. The first light of dawn was only just creeping in through the windows, and he reached up to rub his temples in hopes of forestalling the headache that was probably coming. Two weeks of practice, and he was still no closer to a stable memory palace. It was ... annoying.

Harry closed his eyes once more in frustration and thought back to his last conversation with Mr. X on the topic. Well, that topic among *others*.

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**8 July 1993**  
**Room 13 at the Leaky Cauldron**  
**(11 days earlier)**

"I warned you, Mr. Potter, that this would be a difficult and challenging time in your Occlumency training," Mr. X said. "To progress beyond this point, you must have a stable memory palace to use as a basis for further developments of your psychic architecture. There are no short cuts."

Harry nodded but was still clearly frustrated. In the abstract, he understood what Mr. X was saying, but applying the knowledge to the inside of his own head was proving daunting.

"So explain it again, please, Mr. X. I'm trying to understand, but so far, I'm having trouble wrapping my head around it."

"That is not surprising, Mr. Potter. Constructing a memory palace is one of the most difficult aspects of Occlumency training. In fact, it is the reason why most Occlumens never advance beyond level three. Had you not shown remarkable dedication so far, I would not even consider asking you to pursue this level of development at such a young age. So, to review: Your memory palace is based on a real-world location where you feel safe and in control of your surroundings. It should also be a place which is, for lack of a better word, somewhat *cluttered*. A library or storage area, for example. A place where you can imagine yourself leaving things behind to be picked up again later. Once you have this psychic safe house fully developed, you can store your most sensitive memories there in a partitioned area of your mind, one where you don't simply hide your memories away but actively protect them with psychic traps capable of actually harming those who push too far into your mind.

Ultimately, your memory palace can even be a place where you store false memories and even false personalities that you can drape over your true self to deceive an intruding Legilimens. Instead of putting up a wall against Legilimency and thereby let your enemy know that you have secrets worth protecting, you can allow the Legilimens to see *what you want*, and thus he will be more likely to accept your false memories as truth without digging any further."

Harry nodded. "And you've got a memory palace like that?"

"I do, though I don't anticipate you seeing it anytime soon. Or at all. However, my memory palace *is* important to your future training. Since you seem bent on exploring Legilimency as well as Occlumency – and against my recommendations, as I've said – I have used my own memory palace to create a set of false memories. As you practice your Legilimency against me, we will see if you can penetrate my shields to discover the false information I have left for you. Frankly, you're not paying me enough to risk letting you see my true memories. My false persona, however, will be realistic enough to replicate the process of Legilimency thought-reading."

Harry nodded, but then, Mr. X paused.

"Not to beat a dead hippogriff, but you *do* realize that it is *illegal* for someone not properly registered by the Ministry to read the thoughts of another without either permission or a judicial order signed by the Chief Warlock, do you not?"

Harry stiffened slightly. He knew all this already, but it still made him nervous to edge as close to illegal conduct as he was now contemplating. He wondered how Snape got away

with it for so long. Dumbledore's influence, he supposed. "I understand all that, Mr. X."

The man sighed. "I am contracted to teach what you want to learn, Mr. Potter. But I feel compelled to say it once more. You don't *have* to develop your Legilimency powers just because some *school teacher* tells you to, no matter how much regard for him you have. There are risks, both psychological and legal, to pursuing this path."

"I appreciate your concern, Mr. X. But I have this power. And I am afraid that I might be a danger to myself and others if I don't figure out how it works and learn to use it safely."

Mr. X grimaced and shook his head. "On your own head be it then. Alright, let's start talking about Legilimency exercises."

And after a brief and rather confusing introduction, Harry spent the next hour growing increasingly frustrated at how difficult it was to read someone else's mind with Legilimency, even when the intended target was actively trying to help you do so. By the end of his first Legilimency lesson, all Harry had to show for himself was a splitting headache and a vague feeling that Mr X (or rather the secondary persona whose false memories Mr. X had encouraged him to read) liked the Tutshill Tornados Quidditch Club, dark chocolate, and possibly a large orange tabby. Actual memories were still beyond the boy.

At the end of the lesson, Harry looked at the clock and saw that he still had a few more minutes before Artie and Mr. Y came in to oversee the Memory Lock Charm and ensure that Mr. X remembered nothing he might have learned from his psychic lessons with Harry. The boy thought for a



moment and decided that there was no time like the present.

"Mr. X, before we break for the day, I have a question for you. Or more accurately ... an offer. I happen to know someone who is looking for a high level Legilimens for a job."

The other man, whose features Harry couldn't truly see due to special Notice Me Not Charms, studied the boy quizzically. "A ... job. I find it interesting how much portent you can impose on a one-syllable word like '*job*,' Mr. Potter. If I didn't know you better, I'd be certain that this *job* was something of which the Ministry might disapprove."

Harry bit his lip. For one of the few times since entering Hogwarts, he was unsure of how to proceed in a conversation with someone else. He assumed it was because the other man was a far better Occlumens and Legilimens than he would likely ever be. Finally, he decided to bite the bullet, since the man was not expected to remember anything Harry told him in just a few minutes.

"Well, to be honest, it's not *entirely* legal." Harry swallowed. "Actually, in all honestly, it's pretty wildly illegal. But I can promise that it will pay *a lot*. And I am fairly comfortable in saying there's no way you'll get caught. My ... friend has ... some minds he needs read. And while I admit it's technically a criminal enterprise, I can promise you that it's for a good cause."

Mr. X smirked. "And what sort of good cause can come from something so nefarious that you are this evasive about what is entailed, Mr. Potter?"

Harry looked away for a second. Then, he realized what he needed to say. "When we first met, you were afraid for your

family in the event that Voldemort returned. My friend wants to make sure that never happens, but he needs a good Legilimens to ensure it."

Mr. X was silent for a good long moment. "You need a Legilimens ... to forestall the return of You-Know-Who? I would say that I must think on this, but that will be a problem since my memories of this conversation will soon be erased."

"We'll use a different password to lock your memories of today, and I'll send an owl unlocking them tomorrow. Naturally, we won't tell you everything until you've sworn some pretty tough oaths, and I'll make sure you have the right to back out if you decide you won't want to be a part of it once you know all the details."

Mr. X nodded. "And how much is *a lot* of money?"

Harry told him, and had Mr. X not been a master Occlumens, the figure quoted might well have given him a coughing.

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**19 July 1993**  
**Longbottom Manor**  
**5:45 a.m.**

As the memories of his last Occlumency lesson ran their course, Harry sat up in his bed with some frustration. He'd never really broken himself of the Dursley-instilled habit of waking early, and he'd thought the pre-dawn hours might be a good time for meditation. But so far, his progress had been less than he'd hoped, in part because maintaining any sort of inner peace despite the enormous stresses of his summer break taxed his Occlumency to the utmost. Theo. Neville. Lessons with Mr. X and Alastor Moody. Regulus

Black's crazy schemes. Against all that, the degree of serenity needed to advance in his Occlumency training seemed impossible.

*"I need something distracting,"* he thought to himself. His first thought was gardening which was his go-to activity for mental distraction, but it was too early for that. Besides, Neville would have a fit if he ever learned that Harry had dared to touch anything in the Longbottom family garden. And since Harry's relationship with Neville had become alarmingly strained in the past few weeks, he didn't want to do anything else to put pressure on it.

The boy grimaced in anger and once again cursed the name of Tiberius Nott. What the ex-Death Eater had done to Theo was bad enough, but now it was affecting another of Harry's best friends as well. According to Lady Augusta, the problem was that Neville was wearing his Heir's Ring which keyed him in magically to the oaths that bound House Longbottom to the Wizengamot and therefore, indirectly, to House Nott. In fact, it was worse for Neville than for most Wizengamot heirs because his parents were completely incapacitated at the moment. Consequently, Neville was being affected as if he himself were an actual Lord, even though he wouldn't be able to formally take that role for several years to come. And yet, when Harry had asked if Neville couldn't simply take off the Heir's Ring for a while, Augusta had looked so horrified by the idea that he'd never brought it up again.

*"And worst of all,"* Harry thought ruefully, *"Neville really loves his parents."* Perhaps the cruelest aspect of the Ultimate Sanction effect, Neville's deep devotion to his near-comatose parents gave him a strong personal desire to live up to their memories by being the best Lord Longbottom he could be. And the Ultimate Sanction had

apparently twisted that admirable impulse to render the boy even less able to resist the compulsion to hate Theo and, increasingly, anyone else who dared to support Theo.

His thoughts churning, Harry found it impossible to either return to his memory palace or to sleep. But then, he remembered one of the books on the shelf of his Memory Palace and found inspiration. The boy jumped out of bed, pulled on his robe, and made his way to the Longbottom kitchens.

Thirty minutes later, Harry was halfway through the prep-work for a Quiche Amandine (and feeling considerably more relaxed) when he was surprised by a soft cough from behind him. It was Hoskins, the senior of the Longbottoms' two house elves, regarding him with a mixture of surprise and concern.

The elf seemed almost embarrassed, but he persevered. "Apologies, Master Harry but ... surely Master Harry knows that if he desires an early breakfast, he need only call out for a house elf." Then, Hoskins' goggle eyes narrowed angrily. "Has the Dobby elf *refused a summons*?" the elf said, his voice rising slightly in what passed for fury among his kind.

"No, no," Harry said quickly. "I haven't called on Dobby or anyone else, Hoskins." Suddenly, the boy blushed slightly as he realized how silly getting up to cook breakfast would seem to a house elf, let alone to another wizard. "Honestly, I'm not actually hungry. I'm just ... frustrated by some things and couldn't sleep. I thought cooking might relax me."

As expected, Hoskins gave Harry a look that suggested (respectfully) that he thought the boy might be mad.

"Master Harry," the elf said delicately, "cooking ... is *servants'* work."

Harry shrugged. "I know. When I learned how to cook, I was still a servant."

That response seemed to leave the creature even more flummoxed. "Master Harry ... was a servant? For another wizard?"

"No," Harry blushed slightly. "... Muggles."

Hoskins said nothing, but his eyes widened in surprise. Then, he shook his head, as if realizing he'd gotten off track. "That may be so, Master Harry. But ... and Hoskins says this with the utmost respect, sir ... it is the job of us house elves to see that those who dwell in the House of Longbottom are properly..."

"Fed and watered?" Harry finished with a smile. Hoskins nodded. Harry looked back at his prep-work longingly. To his surprise, cooking – for pleasure, not out of servitude – really was relaxing and enjoyable to him. He turned back to the elf. "What if nobody here eats it?" he asked.

Hoskins blinked twice. "Master Harry wishes to cook ... not to eat ... but solely for pleasure?" Harry nodded. The elf considered that for a moment, and then his face suddenly brightened. "Can Hoskins assist?" he said cheerfully. Harry laughed and directed the house elf to begin chopping up some arugula.

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***18 July 1993***

***Excerpt from a letter***

*So all that happened. Near death experience from attempted Sicilian revenge, and all leading up to an exciting finish in an old Italian church. It was like something from a wizarding Francis Ford Coppola. Wait, never mind. You've never actually watched any good movies.*

*Anyway, I wanted to give you a heads up. Hermione has a bee in her bonnet about forming some sort of "support group" for Theo. Which, well, I'm certainly happy to support the third member of the "Silver Trio" (I still want T-shirts!), but I can't imagine how the ham-fisted Mugglish approach she has in mind will do anything except make things worse for Theo and us. Try to make her see reason, please! But don't tell her I said anything!*

*Cheers, BZ*

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**19 July 1993**

**1:08 p.m.**

**"The Training Room"**

Hogsmeade

"CONSTANT VIGILANCE!"

Harry winced at the bellowing voice of his tutor ... and also from the pain from his backside upon which he had just landed. He'd started his summer lessons with the retired auror just a week after getting back from Hogwarts.

Initially, he'd been hoping for an emphasis in dueling, and Moody seemed to be amenable. So every lesson began with a dueling match between Moody and his charges (initially Neville had accompanied Harry to these lessons), and as soon as he'd disarmed his pupils, Moody would offer a brief critique before moving on to less invigorating topics like

Potions, Ancient Runes, and Arithmancy, the latter two being classes Harry would study as electives beginning in his Third Year. Moody also required a full three feet of parchment before the next session in which Harry was to outline every single spell cast during the previous duel and how to counteract or otherwise overcome it. Neville, who had never been particularly interested in dueling, was exempt from that assignment, and since Moody rarely used the same spell twice, Harry's essays were becoming quite expansive.

Alastor Moody, true to his reputation, was *a lot* harder to duel than even the five Hogwarts upperclassmen Harry had taken down simultaneously the previous June. Since summer lessons had started, his longest time to last against Moody had been around two minutes, but he was usually disarmed, flat on his back, or both within thirty seconds. Thus far, he had never successfully disarmed Moody even once. Even dilating didn't seem to help at all since the man almost always cast silently and his wand movements were incredibly fast even at Harry's maximum dilation. Worse, he regularly switched wand hands in the middle of the duel (which Harry didn't even know was possible until the first time Moody did it), and Harry was completely unable to recognize wand patterns cast left-handed rather than right-handed when under the time pressure of a duel.

Today's lesson had been particularly embarrassing. The boy had thought he was doing exceptionally well for a change, lasting for over two minutes and eventually hitting Moody with an Expelliarmus for the very first time. But to his surprise, the Moody he hit simply popped out of existence, and Harry was immediately struck from behind by the *real* Moody's Disarming Charm and knocked down.

"The Doppelganger Defense Charm!" Moody exclaimed as his true form shimmered into view. "It creates an illusory duplicate of yourself to distract your enemies. With enough concentration, you can make it talk and walk around however you want. Cast it along with the Disillusionment Charm, and you can just sit back and watch while your enemy wastes his time and energy boxing with shadows. It's almost relaxing."

Harry, who was still laying on the floor, considered that. Then, his eyebrows furrowed. "Wait a second! You must have had that spell active since before we got here! We carried on a conversation!"

"Yep," Moody said, his lip curling up on one side. "A four-minute-long conversation followed by a two-minute duel with a nonexistent person. And you noticed *nothing* out of the ordinary. Even though the doppelganger casts no shadow, doesn't generate the sounds of footsteps when moving – and that alone should have been a dead giveaway what with my leg and all – and was a helluva lot more agile in combat than me, you never once considered the possibility that you were fighting a mere distraction the whole time until I got bored and took you out from behind. CONSTANT VIGILANCE!"

Harry sighed and climbed to his feet. To add to all his other disadvantages, dueling with Moody had become even tougher now that it was one-on-one. Not that Neville Longbottom was a spectacular duelist, but he at least provided an occasional distraction. However, just two days earlier, Lady Augusta, on the supposed grounds that she was getting tired of her grandson's "moodiness," had sent Neville off on a tour of the family's African holdings along with Cousin Reginald. Neville would be gone for six weeks, returning just a few days before the start of term. Harry



would miss his friend, but for the time being, Neville's absence was necessary. Indeed, as far as Lady Augusta was concerned, it was a requirement.

"Isn't this a bit unfair?" Harry inquired of his tutor. "I mean, in addition to *every other* advantage that '*The Greatest Auror in History*' has, you also get a whole week to set up some impossibly devious strategy for kicking my teeth in!"

Moody let loose with a strange gargling sound that Harry had learned was how he laughed, and the corner of his mouth crinkled up in another malformed sneer. "Never thought I'd live to see a Slytherin whining about someone else being '*impossibly devious*.' My job is (a) to make sure you do well in your classes and (b) to prepare you to deal with the unexpected. That's why you're paying me the big bucks out of that Gringotts account your old man doesn't know about."

Harry froze, and after a few seconds, Moody let loose with another gargling laugh. "Come on, kid. Give me a *little* credit. And stop worrying. I know you've got an account James Potter doesn't know about. I assume it's from an *inheritance* that he *also* doesn't know about. But once I was satisfied that my pay was on the up-and-up and not from some dark wizard who wanted to get the drop on me, I stopped giving a crap about what mysterious family you and your mother are descended from. I've got enough things to be paranoid about as it is without getting drawn into your tedious domestic drama."

"You were actually worried that I hired you for my tutor as part of an assassination plot?!"

"Lad, if you *had* hired me for your tutor as part of an assassination plot, it would only be the fourth most

byzantine and overcomplicated assassination plot I've had to dodge in my lifetime."

Harry shook his head. "Well, now that we're *provisionally* agreed that I'm not an assassin, what's next for today?"

The ex-auror studied Harry for a few seconds, and then his lip crinkled up once more. "Well, first of all, I'm giving you a quick rematch. You just complained that I had illusion spells already running when you came in. Which was obviously unfair of me since no one who tries to kill you in the future would *ever* engage in *advance preparation* or anything silly like that. So to make it up to you, we'll duel again. And this time, I'll let you go first."

Harry's eyebrows rose. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." Moody popped his wand back out of his holster but then held it pointing straight off to the side. "You try to disarm me. I promise I won't cast any spells until after you've cast your first one."

Harry stared at his tutor for a good three seconds. He even dilated slightly to spend more time trying to figure out the catch. Then, when he couldn't think of one, he fired off the fastest Disarming Spell he could. "**EXPELLIARMUS!**"

But to Harry's amazement, as soon as he'd released the spell, Moody simply relaxed his fingers and let his own wand clatter to the floor. The Expelliarmus washed over Moody to no effect, and as soon as the wave of magic had passed ineffectually, Moody twitched his fingers slightly and his wand shot back up into his hand. Instantly, he whipped out a silent Expelliarmus of his own, and Harry was disarmed before he could wipe the shocked look off of his face.

"Hmph. That was less than two seconds, Potter. You were more impressive when you were fighting my doppelganger."

"That ... what ..." Harry paused, closed his eyes, and focused himself. "Okay, what just happened?"

"Theory is as important as practice, Potter. Always know what the spells you cast actually do! Expelliarmus – what is it?"

The boy blinked in confusion at the seemingly obvious question. "It's the Disarming Charm."

"And what does that mean?"

"Um, it ... disarms people?"

"Right. So what happens when you use it on an unarmed opponent?"

Harry opened his mouth, closed it, and opened it again as his eyes lit up in understanding. "Nothing, obviously. If it can't disarm someone, then it has no other effect to perform."

"Correct, as you just saw in an object lesson. That's a neat trick that can get you out of a jam if you're in a one-on-one fight with somebody who gets the drop on you and goes for the disarm."

Harry's eyes narrowed in concentration. "Hang on a minute. Expelliarmus doesn't *just* disarm. I've seen it knock people across the room."

"I've no doubt. A high-powered Expelliarmus can strike with considerable force. Nevertheless, those people *were* armed in some fashion at the time. Or at least holding something in

their hands, which satisfies the spell's definition of 'armed.' Otherwise, they wouldn't have been affected, just as I wasn't just now. It's a simple trick. Just toss your wand aside and then summon it back wandlessly. You have to time it just right so you're unarmed when the spell hits but still have time to summon the wand back and cast with it before your opponent can get off a second, more dangerous spell. You also have to let the wand fall far enough from your hand that the spell doesn't consider you armed even though it's no longer on your person. Generally, at least two to three feet from your wand hand."

"A simple trick?" Harry said in disbelief. "It requires *wandless magic*!"

"Yep. Which is why that's on the menu for today and the rest of this summer."

The boy paused in surprise, and then his face lit up excitedly. "You're teaching me wandless magic?! But it's the middle of July! Do you really think I can learn wandless magic before school starts?"

Moody scoffed. "Merlin, no! I think *maybe* if you push yourself, you can learn one or two wandless spells by the end of your Fifth Year, which will be worth a boatload of points on your Charms and DADA OWLS. You're talented for your age, boy, I'll give you that. But wandless magic is a time-intensive process, and at your age, you simply haven't *used* any of the spells you know often enough to develop the sense-memory you need to cast them wandlessly. Right now, you'll be doing good just to learn to cast spells silently and *that* just requires you to think extra hard. Today, I'm just explaining the basics of wandless magic and giving you a few exercises to try at home."

"At home?" Harry asked in surprise. "But what about the Trace?"

The man gave him a withering look. "Potter, what is the Trace *on*?"

"My wand ... oh! So wandless magic doesn't count as underage magic?"

"Of course it does! It's just a kind of underage magic that can't be detected unless you're dumb enough to do it in front of a Ministry official. I'm assuming you're not nearly that dumb, are you?"

Harry sighed at the implied rebuke. "No sir. I'll be very careful."

"Good. Now what spell do you think you should start with?"

Harry thought for a moment. His first instinct was Serpensortia, but he doubted that was an acceptable answer. "Um, Protego?"

"DUMB!" Moody barked. "Spell power requirements increase by a factor of three to five when casting without a wand, and no wizard alive except Dumbledore or Voldie could *possibly* cast a wandless Protego for more than a few seconds without fainting. We start with *Accio*. Specifically, *Accio Wand*. Since, should you be so foolish as to get caught without your wand, your number one priority should be to get it back!"

Harry flushed, as Moody summoned a nearby chair for him to sit in and take notes before drawing burning figures in the air with the Pyrologos Charm.

"Now then, here is wandless casting in a nutshell. *This*," he said while drawing a large flaming circle, "is your magical core. And this..." He drew a second large circle and filled it with tiny dots of fire. "... is your brain, or what passes for one in your case. Each dot represents a single spell with which you are exceptionally proficient. Learning to cast a spell wandlessly requires you to link one of these spells directly to your core with a psychic strand that represents the sum total of your experience with casting that particular spell."

He flicked his wand, and a thin trail of fire stretched from one of the dots in the "mind circle" over to the larger "core circle."

"Create a link like that, and you bypass the requirement of using a wand that the Merlinian system imposes on you by virtue of your being a British wizard and a Hogwarts student. Of course, there's not any literal strand, psychic or otherwise. That's just a metaphor to help you understand the concept." Moody paused. "Actually, to be honest, your '*magical core*' is also basically a metaphor. Lots of people talk about it, especially the Big Brains in the Unspeakables and your upper-end Healers. But the truth is, if somebody dissected you down to your individual cells and sifted through them for a year, they'd never find anything tangible that might be described as a magical core."

"Well, what *is* a magical core, then?" Harry asked. He'd heard the term used several times but never gotten an explanation of it.

Moody shrugged. "Depends on who you ask. Some say it's something inside you that generates the power that fuels your magic, whether something immaterial that's part of your aura or some part of your body that's below the level

of a cell and too small to detect. Others say its more like a imperceptible portal that lets you draw energy from, well, *somewhere else*. Some people say it's your soul, but I'm not about to wade into *that* metaphysical thicket today. My point is, nobody knows for sure. What is known is that while the core cannot be directly perceived or measured, you can estimate someone's core strength by various magical tests. The Lubinsky-Chang test is the most accurate, but it was invented by foreigners, so here in Britain, we stubbornly cling to the Belby-Cadwallader test for measuring core size. Under that standard, your core would be rated *Theta-Green*, which is rather impressive for someone not yet thirteen. Naturally, core size, in this case, doesn't mean physically big or small but rather refers to magical output. Someone with a larger core can cast more spells before tiring; can cast more physically demanding spells like shields, Patronuses, and Unforgivables; and can master more wandless spells than someone with a weaker core. That last bit is most important to our current discussion because you only have a finite number of these hypothetical metaphorical psychic strands and that number is limited according to your core size. In other words, there's a strict limit on the total number of spells you can possibly learn to cast without a wand. Most wizards don't even bother to learn more than four or five. For the typical experienced auror, it's probably twenty or thirty. I personally know sixty-two wandless spells. For someone like Dumbledore or Voldie, it's probably a hundred or more."

Then, he grimaced in annoyance. "And as much as it pains me to say it, blood purity plays a role. *Usually*. Wizards and witches whose blood purity goes back for several generations *generally* have larger cores than Muggleborns, which is part of the reason for historical discrimination against Muggleborns. *But* some Muggleborns have unusually large cores, bigger than the typical Pureblood

even, for reasons no one understands. And you will be pleased to know that the offspring of Muggleborns and Purebloods like yourself almost always have strong cores and frequently develop *very* strong cores. I happen to know that Albus Dumbledore's mother was a Muggle-born, and while the Dumbledores are not an old family it is considered a Pureblood one."

"Wait a minute," Harry interrupted in disbelief. "You mean, there's actually something to Pureblood ideology?!"

"What I mean, Potter, is that there are tangible ways in which most Muggleborns are at a disadvantage relative to Purebloods in terms of magical potential, although those disadvantages are offset by little things like being less likely to go nuts at some point because you're the product of six generations of intermarried cousins. That said, there are a lot of so-called reasons offered in favor of blood supremacy, most of which are bollocks but some of which have a grain of legitimacy. And if the Purebloods had any damned sense, they'd actively try to intermarry with the more powerful Muggleborns since, as I just said, the resulting Halfblood offspring usually have stronger cores than other Purebloods from their peer group."

"So why don't they? Marry Muggleborns, I mean."

By that point, Moody was growing annoyed at how his lesson plan was being diverted by politics. "Short answer? The old families don't want to marry Muggleborns because they don't provide the political and financial benefits of marrying into *other* old families. And most everybody else dislikes Muggleborns because of propaganda spread *by* the old families to discourage lesser Pureblood families from intermarrying with them and thereby producing stronger Halfblood offspring that might someday overturn the



Wizengamot apple cart." He sighed grumpily. "Honestly, Potter, you *are* a Slytherin, aren't you? Ask around! I'm sure you'll find no shortage of reasons, some plausible, some absurd, for why you should look down on Muggleborns."

"Were you a Slytherin?" Harry asked innocently.

Moody snorted. "Hufflepuff, if you must know. Class of 1951." Then, Moody noticed the surprised expression on Harry's face. "Does that surprise you, boy? That someone with my background could have been a Hufflepuff?"

"No sir," Harry said sincerely. "I have great respect for Hufflepuffs. It's just ... you're the first Hufflepuff I've ever met who, well, *never smiled*."

The man gave his rasping laugh again, and the left side of his mouth crept upwards once more. "Nerve damage! From the same curse that cost me my eye! The right side of my face is permanently incapable of smiling properly. In fact, Potter, I'll have you know that when I graduated top of my class from the Auror Academy, *Witch Weekly* picked me for their *Most Charming Smile* Award."

At that, Harry looked even more shocked.

"What, Potter?" the man said irritably. "Did you think Gilderoy Lockhart invented the damned thing?"

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### ***Five Hours Later ...***

Carefully, Harry climbed up the ladder that led out of Moody's steamer trunk and hauled himself over the side. The trunk itself was in a room in the Three Broomsticks Inn in Hogsmeade where the ex-auror had rented a room for the summer even though he never slept in the bed he'd

paid for. Harry knew about Expansion Charms and even had a trunk of his own containing a small room to sleep in, but he was amazed at the advanced Charm work that went into Moody's portable castle and fortress. He counted fifteen rooms, including a fully-stocked potions lab, a small greenhouse lit by an artificial sun, and "the Training Room," which was a full-sized perfect reproduction of a similar room at the Auror Academy.

"Your trunk is beyond impressive, Mr. Moody," Harry said. "But what will you do if somebody simply *steals* it while you're inside of it."

Moody snorted contemptuously. "If anyone manages to even touch this trunk without my permission, Potter, they *deserve* to catch me."

Harry smiled at that, shook the man's hand, and made his way downstairs to the Floo. Along the way, he noticed a couple sitting in a dim corner snogging rather madly. The man was an off-duty auror who Harry recognized as Michael Proudfoot. The woman, a rather busty Scandinavian-looking blonde, had been introduced to him once before as "Maria Gambrelli." Harry shook his head, passed over to the Floo, and made his way back to Longbottom Manor.

That night, he spent almost thirty minutes gesturing furiously at the wand on his nightstand while thinking "**ACCIO WAND**" as loudly as he could. But the wand never moved.

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***20 July 1993***

***Excerpts from three letters***

*Harry, I know that your friendship with Theo No-Name has always been important to you. But the Potter-Longbottom-Greengrass alliance is still relatively young. And while my family is extremely grateful for the role you played in our elevation to Ancient and Noble status, we simply cannot threaten our status and integrity by continuing to associate with the outcast. My father has been very clear on this, and while I sympathize with the outcast's condition, I must stand with my family. I hope you will allow Slytherin wisdom to guide you in these matters instead of Hufflepuffian sentimentality or, worse, Gryffindorish defiance of cultural standards.*

*Your friend and house-mate,*

*Daphne Greengrass*

*Heiress Presumptive of the Ancient and Noble House of Greengrass*

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*To be honest, Harry, I'm kind of between a rock and a hard place. You know what that means, right? I mean, you're Muggle-raised. I said that to Daphne the other day, and she'd honestly never heard the expression before. Anyway, I don't have any negative feelings about Theo, and I certainly don't want to do anything to hurt him anymore than he already has been by his awful excuse for a father. But ... I'm sorry, Harry, but the simple fact is that I owe way too much to the Greengrass family for everything they've done for me and for my mother. I don't think I can ever truly pay them back, but at a minimum I just can't publicly go against them on something as important in high society as this Ultimate Sanction rubbish appears to be. Of course, you being you, I'm sure you'll find a way around it, and if I can*

*help with that without it getting back to Daphne or her family, I'll do my best.*

*Hope you enjoy the rest of your summer,*

*Tracey Davis*

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*All I know, Harry, is that Missy says that "we owe Harry Potter big time," and Bulstrodes pay their debts. If you want me to cut Theo Whatever-His-Name-Is-Now out completely, I'm fine with that. And if you want me to knock the block off of anyone who messes with him, I'm fine with that too. Daddy always said he wants his little girls to know how to throw a punch as well as any boy can.*

*Millicent Bulstrode*

*P.S. - Any news on whether there might be an opening for Beater?*

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**21 July 1993**

**1:00 p.m.**

**Longbottom Manor**

As Marcus Flint stepped out of the fireplace in the Longbottom parlor, he looked around nervously and took in the opulent scene. He was wearing his best robes, along with his lucky tie, the one made of acromantula silk that he'd use to save Rufus Scrimgeour's life the previous summer. Nevertheless, once at Longbottom Manor, he suddenly felt like a peasant summoned to meet with a prince of the realm. Harry was on hand to welcome him and help brush the floo powder off his robes, and behind him was the lady of the house, the notorious and terrifying Augusta Longbottom.

"Welcome to Longbottom Manor, young man," she said imperiously. "Harry has told me much about you."

"All good, I hope," Marcus replied, but her expression said nothing about whether Harry's report had been good or not. He smiled nervously at the formidable woman and then stopped after he realized how ridiculous fake smiles felt on his face. For her part, Lady Augusta ignored his small joke completely.

"As I'm sure Harry has told you, I and some associates wish to hire your services for the summer, for which you will be reimbursed with enough galleons to pay for your Eighth Year Hogwarts tuition and living expenses. However, these matters are quite sensitive, and you will be required to swear an Unbreakable Vow never to discuss what you hear today regardless of whether you accept our job offer or not."

Marcus swallowed with some difficulty at the thought of an Unbreakable Vow. Then, he looked over at Harry who responded with an encouraging nod. Marcus took a deep breath. This was the path to the future, and an Unbreakable Vow would be a small price to pay if it led to the Auror Academy. "What sort of vow, Lady Augusta?"

Augusta handed Marcus a small card upon which the proposed vow was written. Marcus found nothing *immediately* objectionable in it, and so, at the witch's direction, he clasped arms with Harry and repeated the vow as she directed.

*"I, Marcus Flint, do swear on my life and magic that I will never reveal any confidential matters that I learn today as part of the offer of employment I am here to receive, nor*

*will I reveal any information about the tasks I am to perform should I choose to accept the offer."*

Satisfied, Augusta turned and led the two boys down a corridor while Marcus chatted amiably but still nervously about what sort of job might be in the offing for this level of secrecy. For his part, Harry was politely evasive in answering his concerns. Then, Marcus froze in shock as Augusta threw open the doors to a conference room and strode in to take a seat next to her other two guests already seated around a circular oaken conference table. One was an Asian man who Marcus didn't recognize. The other was a man he knew all too well. For a few seconds, Marcus looked over at Harry in shock and something close to betrayal before turning back to the others in the room.

"I think I need to know what the job is now," he said quietly as he walked slowly forward. Harry moved past him to take a seat alongside Augusta and the other two men as the doors to the chamber slowly closed on their own.

"A fair question, Mr. Flint," said Lucius Malfoy in a languid tone. "To greatly oversimplify things, we require your assistance in an act of High Treason."

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***Meanwhile, in Diagon Alley (a brief interlude) ...***

The two witches made their way casually down Diagon Alley peering in windows and occasionally ducking into dress shops to see what new fashions were on display. One was chattering animatedly in her excitement to be outside shopping on a beautiful summer day. The other had a long-suffering air, as if shopping were a necessary evil. The pair stopped in front Twilfitt and Tattings as the first witch

became excited over a three piece witch's ensemble in a vivid pink. Her companion was less than enthused.

"Oooh, Dolores! Look at this one! Isn't it just *adorable*!" Violetta Edgecombe practically squealed with delight. Next to her, Dolores Umbridge sighed patiently.

"Vi, dear," Umbridge replied, "you've persuaded me against my better judgment that since I'm getting a promotion to work directly for the Minister, I need to improve my wardrobe. I had assumed the goal was to look more professional, not ... *adorable*. And yet everything you've had me look at today has been gaudy things that look less like what a professional witch should be wearing and more like ... like something one might wear *to catch a beau*!"

"Oh pish-posh, Dolores! That's absurd!" Violetta said diffidently. Dolores simply stared her until she finally broke. "Oh alright! Yes, I thought it might be a good idea for you to wear things that might catch Cornelius Fudge's eye. I mean, you're a single woman and he's a single man ..."

"Vi, he's single because *his wife passed away* only three years ago! Yes, he's a handsome, unattached man in a powerful position. But I'm not going to just ... *fling* myself at him like some scarlet woman. It's unbecoming. Honestly, I'm still embarrassed over how I giggled in his office like a school girl when he offered me the job! And anyway, if he were that sort of man, he'd have just hired some pretty young thing who's fresh out of Hogwarts and was working in the secretarial pool instead of a dowdy old frump like me."

"You're not old, Dolores, not by today's standards. And if you're a dowdy frump, it's because you've chosen to be." Violetta sighed in exasperation. "Dolores, we've been best

friends since our school days. I only say this because I care about you. It's been fifteen years since Jack died..."

Umbridge stiffened slightly. "... and just a few weeks before what should have been your wedding day! Now, I know he was a wonderful man and you loved him dearly. And I also know his death was a horrible tragic affair that has affected you deeply. But fifteen years is too long to wear widow's weeds for a man you never actually married!"

Dolores Umbridge started to respond but couldn't. Instead, she looked away for a moment to compose herself. Then, she turned back to her closest friend. "I ... understand what you're saying, Violetta. And perhaps you're right. Honestly, I think I just didn't want to be hurt again. Nor did I want the distraction of dating while I was struggling to build a career despite the mistakes I made when I was young."

At that, perhaps a tiny hint of bitterness crept into Umbridge's voice. Once, she'd had dreams of being a teacher, and she'd been one of the rare few to pursue a Mastery in Magical History in the hopes that if her credentials were good enough, she might be able to present herself as an alternative candidate to the ghostly Cuthbert Binns despite the institutional bias against Halfbloods like her. Then, when she was barely halfway through her Mastery, she finally learned how Binns got the Professor of Magical History job in the first place, why he was still in the job despite the handicap of being dead, and why he would most likely continue to hold the job until long after she was dead herself. At that point, she abandoned her Mastery uncompleted and settled for a job as an archivist for the Department of Magical Education, a dead end position that provided a decent living for her and her small assortment of cats but little in the way of personal satisfaction.



"I suppose now that I've won a decent promotion, perhaps I should consider dating again. But I'm *not* going to throw myself at the Minister of Magic! It's just ... improper!"

Dolores turned back to the dummy in the window and shuddered. "And I'm definitely not wearing anything *pink*!"

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**22 July 1993**

2:00 p.m.

The Three Broomsticks Inn  
Hogsmeade

Marcus Flint appeared in front of the Three Broomsticks in a flash of apparation, his battered trunk in one hand and his broomstick in the other. Tired and sore from the morning he'd had and the decisions he'd made, he entered the inn and shuffled up to the bar. Behind it stood the owner, Madame Rosmerta, who regarded the young Slytherin with some small amount of suspicion. Unlike the Hogs Head Inn where drunken brawls seemed a nightly occurrence, Rosmerta ran the Three Broomsticks as a reputable place, and the Slytherin in front of her looked like he'd just been in a fight himself, as his rapidly swelling black eye could attest.

Undaunted, Flint slapped ten galleons onto the bar. "I'd like a room please. Here's a down payment for the rest of the summer." He paused. "And I'd also like a bottle of firewhiskey sent up to my room as well."

Rosmerta sniffed. "Are you old enough to handle firewhiskey, boy?"

Flint snorted and then winced from the pain in his eye. "I'm of age. There's no Trace on me. And I just told my da' to go

to Hell and left his house forever. If that doesn't make me old enough for firewhiskey, what does?"

Rosmerta studied Marcus carefully before sweeping the galleons off the counter into her hand. "Jamie!" she called out to the barman, "show this man up to Room 4. And get him a bottle of firewhiskey and an ice pack."

---

**22 July 1993**

**10 p.m.**

**Harry's room at Longbottom Manor**

"It's not that I don't want to tell my Dad about you lot," Harry lied through his teeth. "But this is my one chance to find out what he and his friends were like back when they were my age. No offense, Prongs, but now that he's Chief Auror, Dad's a bit of a stick in the mud. I'm sure if I actually told him I had the Map, he'd confiscate it for fear I'd use it for pranks or anything else that might reflect badly on him."

***Mr. Prongs is aghast at the suggestion that he would ever become so stodgy!***

***Mr. Moony reminds Mr. Prongs that everyone grows up eventually, even Marauders.***

**Mr. Padfoot reluctantly suggests that this may well be the influence of the Hell-Flower and reminds Mr. Prongs that he warned Mr Prongs repeatedly of the dangers of getting "whipped."**

***Mr. Moony and Mr. Wormtail gasp in shock and step slowly away.***

**Mr. Prongs snarls angrily and recommends that Mr.  
Padfoot  
shut his gob before we all find out whether it's  
actually possible  
to get into a fistfight in here!**

"Whoa, guys!" Harry said, as he also had no desire to see if the Marauders' Map was capable of tearing itself apart. "Calm down! And Padfoot? I think you should apologize to Prongs for calling his future wife and my mother '*the Hell-Flower*.'"

***"Hmph! Very well, Mr. Padfoot apologizes for his  
intemperate remarks.  
Although he would remind all present that it was Mr.  
Prongs who  
came up with the nickname Hell-Flower after the  
witch in question used  
a Switching Spell during Fourth Year Transfiguration to  
sympathetically  
link his underpants with a bottle of deep-heating ointment!"***

***"Mr. Prongs blushes with embarrassment but accepts  
the apology gracefully."***

***"Mr. Moony and Mr. Wormtail snicker softly."***

Despite himself, Harry chuckled at the anecdote as well and wondered once again how on earth his parents ever got together.

**"Mr. Prongs sighs discontentedly and tries to get the  
conversation back on track,  
though it should seem apparent to all, including Mr. Son-of-  
Prongs, that this Map,  
as ingenious as it is, is a poor medium for learning about  
what teen-aged James Potter**

was like. Mr. Prongs is, after all, at best an imperfect copy of the original dashing lad."

"Well, actually," Harry said aloud. "I've been thinking about that. I had a conversation with my ... well, with a friend who told me he had an encounter with a diary once that was based on enchantments very similar to those used to make the Marauders' Map. And this diary could actually draw readers inside of itself to show them actual memories. Do you think it might be possible for you guys to do that?"

The Map did not respond immediately, and for a moment, Harry feared he'd broken it somehow. He honestly wasn't sure why he was so interested in finding out more about young James Potter. Maybe he hoped to find out why the older version had held such disdain towards him for so long. Or maybe he was just looking for blackmail material. Finally, more words appeared on the Map.

**"Harry, it's Mr. Moony here. What you propose is ...  
interesting, and also, I think,  
within the design parameters of the Map. I, er, I  
mean Mr. Moony, was the actual  
designer of the spells used, so I think I'm the most  
qualified to know.**

***I mean Mr. Moony was.***

***Dammit.***

***Mr. Moony utterly hates this third-person speech gag  
that Mr. Padfoot  
insisted on for some silly reason.***

***Anyway, let us think about this for a few days and  
check back, okay?"***

"Will do," Harry replied, intrigued at these new developments. "Mischief managed."

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***23 July 1993***

***An undisclosed location***

"Michael Proudfoot" stood as still as he could and gasped for air as the bitterly cold liquid poured over him. After a good thirty seconds, the deluge stopped, and Lucius Malfoy pulled out a gold pocket watch and began timing.

"How long to I have to stand here and shiver," the drenched man said through chattering teeth.

"Until our little experiment is completed. That's what your being paid for, my good man. And frankly, your fees are far less than what I've spent this week on all the gallons of Thief's Downfall that are now splattering at your feet."

"Proudfoot" shook his head irritably and rubbed his hands over his soaking and chilled arms while the seconds ticked on into minutes.

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***24 July 1993***

***Room 13 of the Leaky Cauldron***

"Mr. X?" Harry asked tentatively. "I know it's not on our schedule for this week. But could I ask you a few questions about using Occlumency for parallel thought processing?"

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***25 July 1993***

***Excerpt from an invitation***

*I didn't know whether you'd gotten an invitation to Ron's Homecoming Party or not, nor whether you were interested in coming or not. Honestly, your relationship with Jim is so back-and-forth that I didn't want to assume. And also, you've made little secret of your feelings about Ron. However , I did want to inform you of some details you might not be aware of. It turns out that the Office of Misuse of Muggle Artifacts falls under the jurisdiction of the DMLE. There was a memo that went around the other day clarifying that Daddy is not affected by that Ultimate Sanction nonsense. Which also means that none of the rest of us Weasleys are affected either!*

*With that in mind, I asked if we could invite Theo to the party, and Mum and Dad said okay, so if you come, you can actually spend time with Theo before school starts without it causing some big kerfluffle. Luna and Hermione will also be coming too! I hope you join us. It would be nice to see you and Jim hang out together since your actual birthday party is going to be a boring social affair. Well, unless someone goes on a killing spree again. Mum almost said we couldn't go to Jim's official party on the 31 st after last year, but Percy, of all people, persuaded her that the security would surely be better this year, and besides, what are the odds of some hideous disaster happening two years in a row? But I'd still like to see you at a party for just friends instead of Ministry bootlickers.*

*Hope to see you on the 30 th .*

*Ginny*

*P.S. - What's all this hippogriff dung I hear about how Slytherin girls aren't allowed to try out for Quidditch?! You know perfectly well that I can fly rings around Cassius Warrington!*

---

**26 July 1993**

**1:17 p.m.**

**"The Training Room"**

Harry dodged and parried as best he could, but he felt his time running short. If he was going to pull off the stunt he'd been planning since his previous training session, it was now or never. He threw himself to one side, summoning a nearby chair as he did. As soon as it was in range, he tapped it with his wand and transfigured it into a small stationary iron barricade that would give him a few seconds of relief before the transfiguration collapsed. He took a deep breath, centered himself, and cast the Doppelganger Defense Charm.

Moody had been mildly impressed when the Potter boy had actually summoned a chair and transfigured it so quickly. He could have destroyed the barrier at once, but he was curious as to what the boy would do next. Then, to his surprise and delight, *two* Harry Potters rolled out from behind the shield in opposite directions, each of which appeared to fire a Disarming Charm at one of his shoulders. If he guessed wrong as to which was the illusion, he would step right into the true spell. So he did neither. Instead, the grizzled auror took two quick steps forward to put himself into position before the twin spells got too close. Then, he simply turned to one side and exhaled as much as possible. Both beams passed on either side of him with just a few inches to spare.

And then, before Harry could reorient and fire again, Moody swept his arm in a wide arc and cried out: "**VENTUS MAXIMUS!**" A powerful blast of air sprayed out from his wand. The Harry on the right was unaffected, but the one on the left (the *real* Harry) was picked up off the

ground by the gale-force wind and slammed against the rear wall. Instantly, the fake Harry winked out of existence. Moody ambled over to the stunned boy and cast a *Renervate* before summoning a healing potion.

"Congratulation, Potter. I'm actually very slightly impressed." Moody snickered softly as he handed off the potion.

Harry sat up slowly and took the potion gratefully. He had actually hit the wall very hard and felt rather sore. "I don't know why. It didn't work any better than anything else I've tried so far."

"Nonsense!" Moody exclaimed. "Combat transfiguration!? Followed by a clever use of the Doppelganger Defense?! Also, I've been politely ignoring the fact that you're an Occlumens so that I can plead ignorance if it ever comes up in a court case or something, but for you to cast an *Expelliarmus* yourself while directing your doppelganger to mimic your motions? Parallel thought tracks at your age? Not too shabby!"

"Thanks," Harry said sincerely, as he had not won much in the way of praise from the older man. "That thing you did – stepping in between two spells to give yourself more room to dodge. Is that a common tactic or something you thought of on the fly?"

"Bit of both," Moody replied as he offered a hand to help the boy up. It was the first time he had ever bothered to do so, a fact Harry noticed and appreciated. "It's a common dueling tactic to favor spell sequences that force your opponent into moving in the direction you want as a prelude to some attack. Usually, if your opponent is offering you the choice of two options, like *move where I tell you to*



*or get hit with a spell*, your best bet is to look for a third alternative. Remember that, lad. There's almost always a third way if you look hard enough."

Harry was silent for a moment, and Moody noticed.  
"Something on your mind, Potter?"

"I'm improving. I know it. But ... at this rate, how long do you think it will be before I stand a chance against you?"

Moody's remaining eyebrow rose in surprise. "And why, Potter, do you think you might need to actually fight me for real? Or for that matter, anyone close to my level?"

Harry looked away thoughtfully before turning back to meet his tutor's gaze. "In the last two years, I've faced Voldemort twice."

Moody was silent for a moment. Then, he gave a look that was strangely satisfied. "So he *does* still live. I *knew* it." Then, he considered the boy more seriously.  
"Congratulations, Potter. You're in rarified company to have faced Voldie even once and survived, let alone twice."

"He's only at a fraction of his power. Basically a jumped-up ghost. And to be honest, the first time he wasn't interested in killing me and the second time he wasn't in a position to. But ... I'm the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived, and I *don't* have his weird magical Voldemort killing powers. If this is going to keep happening ... I need to be better."

By now, the chair Harry transfigured earlier had returned to its true shape. Moody sat down in it while summoning another chair for the boy.

"*Better* probably won't be good enough, kid. I know of exactly ten people who went wand-to-wand with Voldemort

during the last war and who managed to last more than three seconds. Of those, four managed to escape within eight seconds, and three continued fighting for more than ten seconds before dying horribly. The eighth was Albus Dumbledore, the only man to ever force Voldemort to withdraw. The ninth was your dad who lasted twelve whole seconds but was *about* to die horribly when Albus showed up to save him in the proverbial nick. And the last one was me, and I ... well, I was a special case."

For a brief instant, Moody's face looked visibly haunted, so much so that Harry didn't ask for any details. Then, the man shook off his melancholy.

"I know those exact figures because I have memories of all those encounters, most of which I played for auror recruits so they knew what they'd be getting into. And before you ask, no, I'm not playing them for you!"

"But *Moody*..."

"Don't *whine*, Potter! It's unbecoming of a Slytherin!" That remark actually shocked Harry into silence. Then, he thought about the matter for a few seconds before Moody interrupted him. "And stop trying to figure out how to manipulate me with Legilimency!"

Harry's mouth opened, but only a brief choking sound came out. Moody rolled his one good eye, causing the fake one to whirl madly.

"Surely you didn't think I'd accept James Potter's mysterious Muggle-raised Slytherin son as a student without a thorough background check! Anyway, don't worry about it. It's another of your secrets that I'm happy to keep."

The boy looked frustrated and overwhelmed, and Moody's face softened. "Harry, I won't teach you to *duel* Voldemort because I've taught too many good wizards and witches how to die in the attempt. But I *will* teach you how to *fight* him which is *not* the same thing. *Fighting* Voldemort means lasting long enough to escape or, failing that, to sacrifice yourself in exchange for something you value more than your own life."

Moody held out his hand as if he expected something to come flying into it. And sure enough, something did: a small well-worn paperback book that flew through one of the doors in response to his wandless summoning. He caught it easily and handed it off to Harry.

It was *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu.

"This is a Muggle book!" Harry exclaimed in surprise.

"No, this is *THE* Muggle book. The single best thing that Muggle civilization has ever produced ... with the possible exception of Raquel Welch, but maybe that's just me. Anyway, take that home. Read it. Commit it to memory. But if you absorb nothing else, remember this: "*The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.*"

Harry nodded at the cryptic yet seemingly profound quotation and put the book away with his things. Moody watched him thoughtfully.

"I'll tell you what, though," he said with a touch of smugness. "Here's a little motivation for your continued studies. If you can disarm me *at any point in the next year*, I *will* let you see all those memories of Voldie. All except for my own personal ones."

"At any point?" Harry said suspiciously.

"Yep," Moody replied with his crinkled leering half-smile. "Now then, enough dueling for today. Time for Potions." He turned his back on Harry and headed towards the door to the potions lab, stashing his wand as he went. Harry hesitated for a second and then aimed his wand at the man's back in a flurry of motion.

**"EXPPELLIARMUS!"**

A bolt of red shot towards Moody's back, but before he could strike, the man casually raised his right hand up into the air and wiggled his fingers without even bothering to turn around. The Disarming Charm struck an invisible shield and dissipated without effect.

"OH COME ON!" Harry shouted in frustration. "Are you just *immune* to Disarming Charms?! And what's with all this ..." he waved his hand in the air in imitation of what Moody had done "... finger-wavy bullshit."

"Language, Potter!" Moody chastised as he looked back over his shoulder to his pupil. "And I simply made use of the Anti-Disarming Counter-Jinx."

"The ... What?!"

"The Anti-Disarming Counter-Jinx," he repeated slowly as if talking to a child.

Harry took a deep breath to calm himself. "And why have I never before heard of such a spell?"

"Because practically *no one* has heard of such a spell. The incantation takes longer to say than *Expelliarmus*, and the wand movement is more complicated than that of the Disarming Spell. Consequently, it's nearly impossible to

actually use it for its intended purpose, so most wizards never even bother with it."

"Then how do *you* use it to block Disarming Charms?"

"Easy. I learned it, practiced it for the better part of a year with a friend who would cast *really slow* Disarming Charms at me until I could use it reliably, and then spent another two years mastering it as a wordless, wandless spell. And then, *voila*, I can counter an Expelliarmus with just a wave of my hand."

"In other words, it's *impossible* for me to disarm you!" Harry said indignantly.

"Nundu Pucky! I've never used it in a duel with you so far, and I never will. It's only for when you try to get sneaky outside of duels like just now." Moody thought for a second. "Or possibly if you get sneaky *during* a duel. Or if the mood just strikes me."

Harry narrowed his eyes at the ex-auror. "How is it *possible* you weren't a Slytherin?!"

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**29 July 1993**  
**The Longbottom Kitchen**  
**6:00 a.m.**

The boy stared with disapproval at the plate of confectionaries he and his sous-elf had produced. The petit fours looked okay, but there was a distinct lack of shine to the macarons. He turned to Hoskins.

"Thoughts?" he asked.

"Master Harry should do something about the Dobby elf," Hoskins replied easily.

"No, I mean about the macarons ... wait, what? What's wrong with Dobby?"

"The Dobby elf remains traumatized and damaged by his recent experiences. He serves Master Harry ... adequately. But as Master Harry is but a guest here – though an *honored* one to be sure – the Dobby elf lacks sufficient work to fully satisfy him. Also, Hoskins suspects that one or more of the Dobby elf's prior owners made sport of his suffering, and so he has trained himself to suffer in order to please those with power over him. This explains the Dobby elf's tendency to constantly bang his head on things when he thinks others are unhappy with him and also his habit of bursting into tears at little to no provocation. *Histrionic*, Hoskins would describe it as."

Harry actually frowned at that. "Why do you call him 'the Dobby elf' instead of just 'Dobby?'"

"Because respectfully, Master Harry, he is *not* Dobby. He is just an elf who answers to the name of Dobby. At present, he does not understand your needs nor does he understand the nature of the master-servant relationship you desire. Accordingly, he has no sense of self. No sense of ... Dobby-ness."

The boy nodded slowly at that. Privately, he thought he would never understand house elves if he lived to be 100. "And what would you recommend I do to help him?"

Hoskins shrugged. "Hoskins is a Longbottom elf, sir, and Hoskins suspects that Master Harry would not wish for the Dobby elf to serve you as Hoskins and Lumpen serve the

Longbottoms. The traditions of the Longbottom family elves are ... particular."

"Uh-huh. Are there other ... traditions that you think might suit me better?"

The diminutive creature stopped to think for a few seconds. "Hoskins knows that the wizards in some lands treat their elves like true family members – respected and doting second parents. *Little Father* or *Little Mother* they are called in whatever local language is spoken. Hoskins would be profoundly embarrassed to be addressed in such a fashion, but perhaps the Dobby elf would respond better. Hoskins also knows that some house elves hide themselves completely, performing their tasks with the utmost discretion and manifesting bodily only when called to account by their masters for some misstep or summoned for some specific and unusual instruction. The Hogwarts house elves act as such and outside of the kitchens are seldom seen by others unless summoned by a teacher."

"How do you know so much about the Hogwarts elves, Hoskins?" Harry asked in surprise.

"All house elves know what they need to know about other house elves, though we cannot speak of secret things. As you would not wish the Dobby elf to reveal your secrets, so are we all forbidden to speak too freely of what we learn from our brethren." Hoskins stopped to think for a moment, and then his face brightened. "If Master Harry wishes to know more of the Hogwarts elves, he should consult with Tweak!"

"... Tweak? Who is ... Tweak?"

"Tweak is being the Hogwarts house elf who oversees the needs of the Slytherin dungeons, Master Harry. While

Tweak seldom appears before students, Hoskins is sure he would speak to a Slytherin of sufficient stature and cunning such as your esteemed self!"

Harry absorbed that. "Okay, I guess. I'll look into that. Any other suggestions?"

Hoskins rubbed his chin. "Perhaps Master Harry might speak to his friends who are Pureblooded and who have house elves of their own. Perhaps there are some whose house elves serve their masters in ways you might find pleasing?"

Harry frowned again. Honestly, he couldn't think of any way that house elf service could be *pleasing* to him. Privately, he thought his own upbringing had been far too close to that of an "abused house elf" for him to ever be fully comfortable with having servants of his own. But he had bought Dobby fair and square, and when he'd told the story to Blaise Zabini, the boy had responded with an old Chinese proverb: "*When you save someone's life, you are responsible for them forever.*"

"*Hey, maybe I should write to Blaise,*" Harry thought to himself. "*I'm sure he'll have some ideas about 'proper house elf training.'* *Granted, they might be horrible ideas, but they'll give me a starting place, I bet.*" Then, he turned his attention back to the elf standing before him.

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Hoskins. I will definitely attend to ... the Dobby elf as soon as I can."

"Hoskins is being most gratified, Master Harry."

Harry turned his attention back to the plate. "And the macarons?"



"Hoskins thinks we should be sifting the almond flour more finely and perhaps leave them to set longer before baking."

The boy nodded at that sage advice. "Okay, let's start again."

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**30 July 1993**  
**The Weasley Burrow**  
**11:00 a.m.**

On the morning of Ron and Jim's welcoming party, Harry stepped through the Weasley Floo to find the party was still a work in progress. The other guests were supposed to arrive around noon, and yet Mrs. Weasley was still setting things up and was currently busy levitating a "WELCOME HOME, RON & JIM" banner into position. As soon as she noticed Harry, however, she left the banner partially attached and came over to give him a hug.

Harry forced himself to relax. He would probably never be a "hugger" or even someone who enjoyed any form of close physical contact, but he and Molly Weasley did seem to have a mutual affection. Besides, as far as Harry had been able to discern in the last two years, it was generally considered somewhat ... unnatural to stiffen when someone hugged you, to physically recoil from the simplest forms of human affection and kindness. To most people, it suggested that there might be something *wrong* about one's upbringing. And so Harry had taken that part of himself – the part that flinched at someone's touch because hugs were for Dudley and all Harry got were slaps – and filed it away in a book that sat on a dusty shelf in the Prince's Lair that only existed in the deepest recesses of his mind.

"It's good to see you too, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said with a warm smile so convincing that it fooled even Harry himself. "And I have something for you!"

From the bag he'd brought, Harry produced a small box containing a dozen multi-colored (and shiny!) macarons. After considerable negotiations, Harry had persuaded Hoskins that it was no slight to the Longbottom house elves for Harry to personally cook foodstuffs that would be given as gifts to others so long as the recipients did not live at Longbottom manor. Preparing food in such a way made it a "*gift from the heart*" which was an idea that for some reason appealed to the house elves.

"Oh you shouldn't have!" Molly said, though her expression indicated no reluctance about accepting the gift. According to Ginny, Molly Weasley had a weakness for macarons.

Moments later, the rest of the Weasley family came to welcome Harry as well. He made a point of congratulating George on becoming a Fifth Year prefect which made Molly and Arthur beam with pride, Percy smirk (with what Harry intuited was a rather odd sense of satisfaction), and Fred actually glare for several seconds before he got hold of himself.

"*Oh joy,*" Harry thought sourly. "*More Weasley family drama this year, I'll bet. Oh well, just so long as Fred avoids any cursed diaries, it's not my problem.*"

Harry also got to meet the two older brothers he'd heard so much about. Bill Weasley practically looked like a film star, with rugged but dashing good looks, long hair in a ponytail that actually made Harry jealous despite its vivid ginger color, and an earring fashioned from some creature's fang. Charlie Weasley was short, stocky, and easily the most well-

muscled of his whole family. And apparently, he was also jealous of Bill's long hair – he'd overheard the boy complaining that he'd agreed to let Molly give him "a light trim" that somehow turned into a near buzz cut. Privately, Harry agreed with Molly, as he thought Charlie's facial structure was totally wrong for long hair. He needed something short and spiky, perhaps with a neat goatee. Besides, the man spent most of his time around fire-breathing dragons, and surely long hair would be a safety hazard. Harry resolved to look into hair-care products that were non-flammable as possible future gift ideas.

Over the course of the next half-hour, the rest of the guests arrived: Seamus, Dean, the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Luna Lovegood. Hermione. Theo. A few others that Harry didn't know.

And James Potter.

As everyone else made small talk while waiting for Jim and Ron's arrival back from the Far East, Harry's (still somewhat estranged) father moved towards him with what the man probably thought was "casualness." Harry had known that an encounter with James was very likely, and while it wasn't something he was looking forward to, it was a necessary evil. And so Harry steeled himself and then donned his "Great to see you!" smile. He'd been practicing it lately and had gotten quite good with it. It helped that they were on neutral territory and so Harry could talk to James amiably without any risk of undermining his legal position.

Or revealing anything of his plans.

"Hello, Harry. How has your summer been?"

"Oh, pretty good. Nearly have all my homework done."  
"Actually, I'm still on target to take some of my OWLS next spring," he thought to himself. "How have you been?"

"Good, good," James said with a nod. "Listen, I've had a lot of time to think about how things ended between us last month. When you came to speak with me about your friend, Theo."

"Oh?" Harry said without a hint of coldness.

James looked down at the floor. "I'm sorry. I should have been more sensitive to your concerns and to your friend's plight. Since then, I have looked into matters and, well, I don't see any *legal* way to overturn the Ultimate Sanction or to interfere with ... that business between Tiberius Nott and the Wilkes girl. But I promise I'll keep trying on both fronts. I *have* been able to use my position to expand the number of law enforcement positions that are immune to the Sanction. That's why Arthur and his family aren't affected. And ... if you and Jim want to maintain a friendship with Theo, I'm fine with it. It may cause some problems at work, but I can handle it. Just promise me you'll be careful."

"I will ... Dad. I promise."

The conversation lasted for several more minutes, during which Harry intimated that he'd spent most of the summer lounging around the Longbottom pool rather than pursuing Occlumency, Legilimency, and dueling lessons with Mad-Eye Moody. "*After all,*" thought Harry. "*It's not like it's any of your business.*"

Then, Harry checked himself internally and was surprised at how much anger and bitterness towards James was still bubbling away in his subconscious. If he weren't an Occlumens, he'd probably be throwing sarcastic insults by

now. After a few seconds analyzing how his emotional reactions to his father were affecting his reasoning abilities, Harry sighed loudly (again, internally). Sometime soon, he needed to sit down and sort out his internal feelings about his father. Did he really want revenge for James's abandonment of him? Or would he be satisfied if he attained a position of personal security sufficient to ensure that James (and Lily and everyone else who'd played a role in the Privet Drive disaster) would never be able to hurt him again? After all, another of Blaise's Chinese proverbs was: *"If you seek revenge, dig two graves. One for yourself."* Then again, if he didn't really want revenge against James Potter, why did he go along with Regulus's current scheme?

All of those thoughts twisted and turned in the secondary layers of Harry's thought processes, but none of them showed on the surface level as Harry and James moved on to a perfectly civil conversation about Slytherin House's prospects in the coming Quidditch season. Harry conceded that it was a rebuilding year for Slytherin. They had lost Drake and Marcus (James actually did a double-take at the name "Drake"), and there was speculation that Derrick and Bole might not return to the team. After their near expulsion the previous term followed by poor end-of-term grades and even worse OWLS, their respective parents had been furious and were considering forcing them to drop all extracurricular activities. It was entirely possible that Harry, Pucey, and Bletchley would be the only returning members, whereas the Gryffindors and the Hufflepuffs both would have their entire teams returning intact.

"Oh," James said suddenly. "That reminds me. Since we're doing family gifts today instead of at Jim's official party tomorrow, this is for you." He produced a small untitled book and handed it over to Harry. The boy opened it up and

was surprised to see that it was an entire book of hand-drawn Quidditch Chaser plays. It also came with a sizeable gift certificate to Quality Quidditch Supplies.

"The gift certificate is for whatever you need, but I also wanted to give you something more personal. That's my old playbook from when I was a Gryffindor Chaser. I thought you might find some use for it."

Harry studied the book for a few seconds. "This isn't a magical copy. It's the original." He looked up at James. "Your not giving Jim a copy of this?"

James shrugged. "He's a Seeker. It wouldn't be of much value to him. And the Gryffindor Chasers use a Holyhead-style zone offense. I was always more a fan of the lateral transfer offense that Puddlemere and Portreeve use. Which, ironically, is what you and the other Slytherin Chasers used last year."

The man seemed almost embarrassed to admit that the Slytherin Chasers under Marcus and Harry's influence had become closer to his ideal of what Chasing should be than his own House. This was news to Harry since he hadn't known anything about James's feelings on the matter and, for that matter, didn't actually know enough about formal Quidditch play-making to realize that he was basically reinventing a well-established approach. At the time, he'd just assumed he was applying Slytherin cunning to the rules of the game.

Harry found himself genuinely surprised and slightly touched by the gift. The previous year, James and Lily had given Harry and Jim identical gifts – absurdly overpriced Firebolts that showed the Potters had money to burn but no sense of personal connection to their sons. This, however,

was actually thoughtful. Instinctively, Harry plastered a smile of genuine gratitude onto his face while brutally suppressing his actual feelings down into the lower levels of his mind until he could meditate and decide how he *really* felt. To his surprise, he now suspected a touch of guilt might be a part of the mixture.

Happily, before Harry had to contemplate that possibility any further, there was a whoosh of flame from the fireplace, and the guests of honor stepped through - Jim, Ron, and Lily had arrived, and both boys were suitably delighted by the surprise party. James excused himself and made his way over to the Floo, where he gave a hug to Jim and tussled the boy's hair before giving his embarrassed wife a kiss. That is, she seemed embarrassed to be kissed like that in front of a crowd, but she obviously didn't mind getting kissed by her husband at all, and Harry remembered that they had been apart for a full month. The boy idly wondered whether they were still sleeping in separate rooms at Potter Manor.

---

Jim gave Harry a big affectionate hug, oblivious to the psychic hoops his older brother had to go through in order to accept it.

"How was the trip home?" Harry inquired. "You said the trip over made you sick for two days."

"I'm fine. They taught Ron and me a meditation kata that we could practice before taking the portkey from Shamballa to London that would help with portkey sickness."

Harry laughed. "You and your meditation."

"You should try it," Jim said with a smile. "You might learn a thing or two. Anyway, here, I got you something." He

produced a wrapped package from the bag he brought through the Floo. "Though you probably will want to open it at home."

"Likewise," Harry replied with a smile as he handed his twin a slightly larger and more skillfully-wrapped package. "Though probably for different reasons."

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"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Ron. "*George* is a *prefect*?! How did that happen?!"

"No idea," Fred said coolly. "But I guess me and Lee might have an opening for the position of *partner in crime* if you're interested."

"Um," Ron replied somewhat nervously.

---

"Luna?" Hermione said with some concern. "Are you feeling alright? You look like you haven't been sleeping well."

Luna looked up at her friend and house-mate in surprise. "Really? Funny you should say that. Because ... I have been having some odd dreams lately."

"Oh? Tell me more."

---

"As near as I can tell," Harry said to Ginny, "there's no formal or even informal rule in Slytherin against female Quidditch players. Girls just don't try out. It's not even a sexist exclusionary thing on the part of the guys. Marcus told me once he'd encouraged some of the girls who were good fliers to try out, but they wouldn't. I think it actually has more to do with the more influential Pureblooded girls



thinking that it's ... *unSlytherin* or something for girls to try to intrude on what is perceived as a guy-thing."

"Whatever, Harry. You know I don't care about impressing the Purebloods. So can I try out for Seeker this year?"

"I don't see why not. Just be ready for more than the usual sniping from the upper-years about you being unladylike or what-have-you."

Ginny snorted. "Please. I'm the Slytherin Weasley! How much worse could *that* get!"

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"Theo, right?" said Jim Potter as if he and Theo had not been Sorted the same year and had spoken on several occasions. Then again, Theo thought this might possibly be the very first time that he and Jim had spoken one-on-one without Harry as intermediary.

"Yep, that's me. And you're Jim, right?" Theo replied smoothly, as if he weren't talking to the most famous thirteen-year-old in the wizarding world.

"Um, yeah." Jim paused as if uncertain how to proceed. "So how are you holding up? I know you had ... some bad stuff happen to you."

Theo almost laughed out loud at Jim's gift for understatement, but he suppressed the impulse. The Boy-Who-Lived was, for some baffling reason, trying to be nice. Theo thought it would be churlish to mock the other boy's efforts.

"You could say that. I'm Theo No-Name now. Which is better in some ways than being called Theo Nott, but I know it will

cause problems when we get back to school. Whatever comes, I'll handle it as best I can."

Jim looked around conspiratorially and then moved closer. "Are you worried about getting bullied in Slytherin House?" he asked.

"Why do you ask?" Theo said suspiciously.

Jim pursed his lips for a second. "I've been thinking of starting a student-run self-defense group, mainly for Muggleborns and Muggle-raised students who get picked on by older Purebloods. I'd like for you to join us. It's all people who won't be affected by the curse you're under, so you'd be safe with us."

Theo crooked an eyebrow. "Does this have something to do with Hermione's SPAM thing?"

Jim blinked twice. "Her what?!"

---

"I know you pride yourself on *Slytherin subtlety*, Harry," said Hermione firmly, "but Theo is my friend too, and I insist on supporting him. What's more, I think it's appalling in general that our entire society can be so casually influenced by a single dark wizard's malicious curse, and I want to start a group to raise public awareness against it."

"This is that SPAM thing that Blaise wrote me about, isn't it?" Harry asked with some amusement.

"We are *not* calling it SPAM!" she hissed before looking around in embarrassment to see if anyone heard her outburst. Then, she continued more quietly. "I was thinking about calling it the Society for the Prevention of Abusive Magic, but I realized at once what a silly acronym that

would make. I haven't decided on a new name yet. I suppose we'll just wait until the first meeting and ask for suggestions."

"If Blaise is involved, don't be surprised if SPAM is one of them."

She sighed almost dejectedly. "Don't worry. I won't be."

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"I'm glad your back, Lily-flower" James said affectionately. "I've missed you a lot."

"I sent you an owl-post every other day," Lily said with a smile.

"It's not the same," he said with a sulk before taking a sip of Molly's lemonade.

"No, I suppose it's not. For starters, there are some things we should probably talk about that you wouldn't want to see written down..." she leaned in to whisper "... *Prongs*."

It took several seconds for James to clear his throat after almost choking on his lemonade.

---

"Wait a minute!" Bill exclaimed in excitement. "You figured out how to convert explosive runes into a ward breaker?!"

"Well, I *think* so," George replied. "It's not like I could test it out, but I'm pretty sure it would work."

Then, George actually got a bit nervous at the look his eldest brother was giving him. He was used to either the Amused Twinkling Eyes or the Grimace of Disappointment.

Bill's current look was something new, something ... calculating.

"Tell me, George. Have you ever considered a career in curse-breaking?"

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***Longbottom Manor***  
***5:30 p.m.***

An hour after the party had broken up, Harry was back in his room where he opened Jim's gift. It was an autographed copy of Gupta Baskar's book ***The Serpent's Tongue*** about the known history, theorized origins, and suspected advanced properties of Parseltongue. There was a note inside.

*"Harry - You told me repeatedly that you're not a Parselmouth, and I accept that. But if nothing else, I think the information in this book would be good for an enterprising Slytherin like you to know. Who knows. Maybe you'll try to learn Parseltongue the hard way. And it is a very hard way, apparently, but if anyone I know could do it, it would be you. Happy Birthday!*

*PS - I promise I'll do whatever I can to help your friend Theo."*

Harry found himself strangely touched by his brother's sincerity, and he now wished he'd put more thought into the gifts he'd gotten Jim. He hoped his brother appreciated them and the spirit in which they'd been given.

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***Meanwhile at Potter Manor...***

Once back at Potter Manor and in his own room at last, Jim Potter opened Harry's gift box. There were three items within – an expensive leather wand holster, a book, and what appeared to be a Muggle T-shirt – along with a note.

*"Jim – I have no idea why you've resisted using a wand holster up until now. I have recently been advised that it's actually dangerous to carry your wand around in a back pocket as I've seen you do on occasion. Apparently, it's a good way to blow one of your buttocks off! The book is **Seeker Tips and Tricks** by Benjy Williams. I know you're a fan of Puddlemere and said once he was your favorite Seeker, so I thought it might give you some inspiration. Finally, the shirt's just something to keep you humble. Merlin knows we Potters need as much of that as we can get. Happy Birthday, Little Brother!"*

Intrigued, Jim set the wand holster and book aside before pulling out the T-shirt. He held it up so that he could get a good look at it. Six months earlier he'd have probably ripped it to shreds in a fury, but now he just laughed in delight. The shirt was in Gryffindor crimson with letters of Gryffindor gold that proudly identified the wearer as ...

## **SUPREME GIT OF THE UNIVERSE**

Jim laid back on his bed still smiling. He suspected that this might become his new favorite shirt.

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**11:00 p.m.**

**Thurso, Scotland**

The township of Thurso had the distinction of being the northernmost town in the British Isles. And among wizards, it also held the distinction as the only Muggle town so far north that it was slightly outside the network of ley lines,

wards, and detection spells used by the Ministry of Magic to guard the nation against magical invasion. A small town, its population was listed at 7,598 as of this morning. By noon, the population had risen by eight. By that evening, it had dropped by more than twenty. And now, with a pop of apparation, it had risen by one more.

"And what's all this then?" Peter Pettigrew said irritably as he took in the carnage. He was expected at Jim's party early the next morning and was quite put out at the prospect of being up all night cleaning up after a pack of werewolves. "What part of *discreet insertion* did I fail to make clear?"

Seven of the eight blood-soaked werewolves standing before him growled menacingly in response to Pettigrew's sarcasm, but the eighth was more familiar with the wizard's humor. Not to mention how dangerous he could be if crossed.

"It was a long trip, Pettigrew. My pack was hungry, so we fed. It matters not. I'm a wizard as well as a werewolf, as are two of my pack. I can conceal our ... indiscretions."

"Conceal? Almost two-dozen violently mutilated and partially-eaten Muggle corpses are *indiscretions* for you to *conceal*?"

"Houses burn, Pettigrew, whether from gasoline or an Incendio. What Muggle would know the difference? What wizard would care?"

Peter shook his head. "Walk with me, Greyback." And the animagus turned and stalked out into the nearby woods with the pack alpha following behind.

A moment later, Peter finally spoke. "There's been a change of plans."

"A change? Bit late to introduce changes, isn't it?"

"You and I are both agents of change, Bob. You'll adapt."

"Don't call me Bob," the werewolf snapped. "I am Fenrir Greyback."

"You're Bob Greyson, the Muggleborn son of a reputable though now-deceased Muggle bank officer from Leeds. And a Ravenclaw to boot!"

"That was before," Fenrir replied. "Bob Greyson was my *human* name."

Peter sniffed almost disdainfully at the werewolf's pretensions. "Whatever. Anyway, we're putting the Potter operation on hold. Something else has taken priority."

"What?"

"Rescuing a damsel in distress."

Fenrir stopped suddenly and then Peter turned to face him.

"You're joking," Fenrir said dubiously. "Who?"

"The Toymaker's Daughter. And perhaps the future mother of the Toymaker's Heir. As a female, she cannot inherit the Wilkes lordship, but it *will* pass to any wizarding offspring she births, along with everything else that the Toymaker hid away for a rainy day. Which is why that wretched old bore Tiberius Nott has wiggled his way into a marriage contract with a witch fifty years his junior."

"Uh-huh. And we're rescuing her from that dastardly fate?"

"Of course. We have plans in place for the Dark Lord's resurrection. I'll be damned if I let Tiberius Nott just show

up at the last minute with a fortune in galleons and dark artifacts and weasel himself back into our master's good graces."

"Right. And you want to, what, marry the child yourself?"

"Certainly not!" Pettigrew said as if genuinely offended. "I plan to extract her still beating heart with an enchanted dagger and incorporate it into a potion that, once consumed, will cause the Wilkes biomagical wards to recognize me as the new Lord Wilkes for a period of 48 hours. More than enough time to transfer the contents of the Wilkes vaults to my own."

Fenrir stared at Pettigrew for several seconds before shrugging. "Still better than what Nott has planned, I suppose."

"Indeed. Now here's what we're going to do."

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**31 July 1993**

**Potter Manor**

**The Boy-Who-Lived's Birthday Gala**

Peter covered his mouth with his hand to conceal a deep yawn and then shook his head. Next to him, James Potter noticed.

"Late night?" James said with some concern.

Peter nodded. "I had some unexpected work travel on behalf of one of my other clients. Didn't get back to the apartment until after two."

"The night before Jim's birthday?" James exclaimed.



"Like I said ... unexpected."

James smiled and shook his head. "Well, was it at least profitable?"

Peter grinned at his oldest friend. "That's yet to be seen, but I'm quite bullish on my prospects."

James laughed and clapped his closest friend on the shoulder as the two surveyed the Potter grounds together. There was a noticeable increase in the number of aurors present at the gala this year, as well as improvements to the wards and security measures, and James seemed confident that there would be no repeat of last year's carnage. Peter agreed and said he expected the gala to be as boring as it normally was.

Nevertheless, both James and Peter kept a careful eye on the Potter Twins, though for different reasons. For James, it was purely out of parental interest tinged with regret for past mistakes. For Peter, it was with a godfather's pride in Jim combined with a barely concealed disdain for Harry. Disdain and suspicion.

*"Ten years in a boot cupboard," Peter thought. "By rights, the little brat should be an emotional cripple if not a borderline psychotic. And yet there he is hobnobbing with Dumbledore and Fudge like he was a born politician. What is your secret, Harry Potter?"*

And indeed, the object of the two Marauders' attentions was at that moment speaking conversationally to several prominent politicians with the poise and charm of someone many years his senior.

"Ah, Harry, m'boy," Fudge said. "I want you to meet someone. Allow me to introduce Pius Thicknesse. He's a

highly-decorated auror who works with your father. It hasn't been made official yet, but I'll be appointing him to Senior status to fill the hole left by James' promotion in just a few days."

Harry smiled at Thicknesse and made a note to look into his background later. "Congratulations, Auror Thicknesse."

The man gave a polite nod but otherwise revealed nothing of his response to the Minister's announcement. "Thank you, Mr. Potter. I look forward to continuing my work alongside your father. He's a fine man."

Harry gave a nod of acknowledgment himself while mentally docking Thicknesse several points for having a positive opinion of James. Then, he turned his attention to Dumbledore.

"Gentlemen, I hope you will excuse me, but if you don't mind, I would like to borrow the Headmaster for a few minutes. Some minor school-related matters."

Fudge and Thicknesse both chuckled jovially and headed back towards the refreshments table, leaving Harry and Dumbledore alone.

"And what might I do for you, Harry?"

"I was hoping to talk about Theo No-Name, sir."

"Ah, yes. Most regrettable circumstances that."

"I've been told that the Hogwarts professors are not affected by the Sanction. Is that true?"

"It is indeed, Harry. The faculty are not directly affected, and I have already sent out memos to all of the faculty to be

especially vigilant for abuse targeted towards the young man. Alas, those students most likely to be particularly affected by the Sanction are also most likely to be in your house. Your Seventh Year prefects will not be directly affected, but the Sixth and Fifth Year prefects will be to some extent due to their family connections. And even those Slytherins not directly affected will be subject to significant peer pressure, I fear."

Harry nodded. "Any advice?"

"Well, my usual recommendation for any situation is '*do what is right, not what is easy*,' but I have noticed that most Slytherins find that an unhelpful suggestion. Though I was a Gryffindor myself, I am well aware of what a social minefield your House has always been and that it is even moreso since the end of the last war. You have made remarkable strides in bending Slytherin House away from its traditional associations with blood purism and support for Voldemort in particular. I can only encourage you to persevere in your endeavors even though I fear I can offer little practical assistance."

The boy absorbed that. It was less than he was hoping for, but then perhaps it had been naive of him to think that Dumbledore could solve a problem as intractable as this. Then again ...

"What about your position as Chief Warlock, sir? Surely there is some way to legislatively undo the Ultimate Sanction."

"Alas, Harry, the wheels of government turn slowly and with imprecision. The Inheritance Act was passed by the Wizengamot with an 80% affirmative vote. Only a 75% affirmative vote is needed to pass laws which can magically

affect Wizengamot members and those bound to them by oath or blood, and it would require an equal percentage or greater to repeal any part of that law. Since Lord Nott's faction presently commands at least 30% of the outstanding votes, I cannot see how a three-quarters voting bloc can be obtained. Indeed, as bad as things are for young Theo, they could have been far worse."

"How so?"

"Well, as I said, the Inheritance Act was passed by a margin of 80% to 20%. Had it been *unanimous*, the law's provisions, including the Ultimate Sanction, would have held force over every wizard or witch in Britain automatically upon selecting a wand."

Harry's eyes widened in shock. "Has that ever happened?"

"Not since the founding of the Wizengamot itself since, naturally, the passage of the Wizengamot Charter in any form would have required unanimity. The requirement of wand usage rather than other foci as a mark of citizenship has been part of Magical Britain since its foundation. As for the Inheritance Act, it was the product of a time of extreme panic, since the nation had only just narrowly evaded conquest by a hostile foreign power that would likely have initiated a bloody purge against any British wizards or witches judged a threat to the conquering regime. It is, sadly, not uncommon for governments to pass foolish laws in response to crises. Much more recently, we saw similar shortsighted legislation during the last Wizarding War with the passage of the Death Eater Laws. Of course, those laws did not command anything close to a 75% majority, and so they were not backed by force of magic. But they did significantly infringe upon the rights guaranteed to all wizards and witches under the ICW Charter. Had the Death

Eater Laws not been designed to sunset automatically thirty days after the confirmed destruction of Voldemort, Magical Britain's ICW status would have been jeopardized with potentially disastrous results for the nation and the world."

Harry looked around to make certain they were not being overheard. "Is that why the government's position has always been that You-Know-Who is really dead even we know better?" he asked quietly.

Dumbledore nodded and then spoke just as quietly. "There was enough physical evidence left at Godric's Hollow to confirm that Voldemort's physical form was destroyed. Had the government attempted to keep the Death Eater Laws in place merely upon unconfirmed suspicion that Voldemort lingered as a spirit, the ICW would have almost certainly declared Magical Britain as being in violation of Charter provisions, which would have led to international sanctions or worse at a time when we were desperate to rebuild."

Harry considered that. *"A thirty-day window to handle every Death Eater-related legal matter. Suddenly it's less surprising that animals like Nott slipped through the cracks."*

"Augusta might be someone to talk to about that," Dumbledore continued. "She took a rather strong interest in the Death Eater Laws after what happened to her son and daughter-in-law at the hands of the Lestranges." He looked around. "Are she and Neville here today? I had wanted to say hello to them both."

"Unfortunately," Harry replied smoothly. "Neville is abroad. Lady Augusta was going to come, but she was feeling a bit under the weather and decided to stay home."

"Nothing serious, I hope."

"No, just a summer cold." And as casually as possible, Harry avoided eye contact with his Headmaster.

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***Longbottom Manor***  
***6:45 p.m.***

Hours later, an exhausted Harry stepped through the Floo into the Longbottom parlor. He dusted off his clothes as much as possible and then handed his jacket off to Dobby for cleaning. Then, the boy made his way through the house to the meeting room on the far side of the manor. Lady Augusta, who did not look the least bit sick, was sitting at the table playing solitaire.

"Any news?" Harry asked.

"No," she replied without looking up. "But it's quite early yet."

Harry glanced over at the clock on the wall. It didn't feel "early" after the day he'd had.

"By the way, Dumbledore sends his regards."

"Mmm," she replied, still without looking up.

The two waited together in silence.

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***Potter Manor***  
***11:55 p.m.***

James Potter had just changed for bed after an exhausting day when one of the Potter house elves came for him saying that there was an urgent Floo call from the Auror's Office. Grumbling, he threw on his robe and jammed his wand into

his pocket before heading swiftly to the main fireplace. On the other end was Kingsley Shacklebolt, looking as grim as James had ever seen him.

"Shack, what's going on?" he asked.

"Permission to come through the Floo, sir?" the auror replied while ignoring his boss's question.

"Granted," James said. Then, he stepped back in surprise when Shacklebolt came through accompanied by three other aurors. All of them had their wands out.

"What is this?" James asked again and with a hint of anger.

"Chief Auror Potter," Shacklebolt began, his face a mask of professionalism, "I must respectfully ask that you turn over your wand at once for examination."

"You ... what?" James said in shock.

"Sir ... James ... please. Hand over your wand."

James pulled his anger back under control. Kingsley was one of his best aurors and also one of the few he considered a friend rather than a coworker. He pulled his wand out of his robe pocket and handed it over butt first. "There better be a *damned* good explanation for this, Auror Shacklebolt."

The other man did not respond. Instead, he took the wand and handed it over to another auror who performed the Priori Incantatem Charm on it. Other than a few minor Transfigurations and Scourgify Charms, James had not used his wand all day.

"Well," he asked impatiently.

Shacklebolt ignored him. "We'll need to check the wands of Lily and Jim, just to be certain. And also perform a magical search of the manor house to confirm that there are no other wands on the premises."

"The *hell* you will!" James roared. "You will not intrude upon my wife, my son, my home, or my person one tiny bit more until somebody tells me *what the hell is going on!*"

Kingsley took a deep breath. "Approximately six hours ago, Chief Auror, three individuals penetrated the security at Azkaban Prison and staged a successful jailbreak that liberated Sirius Black, all three of the Lestranges, and Augustus Rookwood."

James stared at his subordinate nearly slack-jawed. "That's ... that's impossible," he said weakly.

"Six hours ago, I would have said the same. And yet, it has happened."

"Do we have any idea who's responsible?" James asked in a shaky voice, as he struggled to come to grips with the magnitude of the night's disaster.

Kingsley hesitated and then took a second deep breath. "According to all available evidence, the three intruders were Michael Proudfoot, Cornelius Fudge ... and *you*."

And for only the second time in his entire life, James Potter was rendered completely speechless.



# Azkaban

## CHAPTER 7: Azkaban

The island of Azkaban first came to the attention of Wizarding Britain in 1443 when non-magical (for Muggle was not yet a word) traders reported sighting a previously uncharted isle halfway between the Orkney and Shetland Islands. Even more surprisingly, those traders claimed that there was a mighty fortress already built there with a foreboding tower far taller than even the greatest castles of the British Isles. While the non-magical authorities dismissed the reports as the result of too much liquor, word soon passed to wizarding ears. Curious and concerned, the Wizengamot sent an expedition to the island.

What they found there was the stuff of nightmares.

The island had apparently been raised from the seabed by the dreaded Emeric the Evil sometime during the previous century, and he constructed a great tower there for some fell purpose. After Emeric's fall and execution, his disciple, the dark wizard Ekrisdis, claimed the island and tower for his own ends and hid both behind impenetrable wards and invisibility charms. Ekrisdis dwelt in the tower of Azkaban for nearly a century while continuing his vile experiments into the darkest arts (usually on captured non-magical sailors) until death from old age finally claimed him. Azkaban's protective charms endured for nearly twenty years after Ekrisdis's death before failing and leaving the island visible to the world.

Most of the horrors contained within Azkaban were scoured away by the Wizengamot's expeditionary forces, though many wizards lost their lives in the attempt and many

others later *took* their own lives rather than live with the knowledge of what they had seen. Yet the greatest horror of Azkaban could not be purged. For in the caverns and tunnels beneath the tower lay something that was *beyond* a nightmare – a nest of Dementors numbering in the hundreds. Though Dementors were known to the wizards of Britain and Europe, their numbers had been thought small. Previously, most Dementors had been encountered individually or, at worst, in packs of three to five. Before Azkaban was revealed, most wizards would not have believed there to be more than a few hundred Dementors in the world, let alone in a single place. But the great pit that lay beneath the foundation of Azkaban *teemed* with the creatures. Frightened and unable to cleanse the island of its Dementors, the Wizengamot withdrew, sealing the island away with its most powerful wards and Notice-Me-Not Charms in the hopes that the folly of Emeric and Ekrisis could be safely forgotten.

And so it was forgotten for nearly three centuries until the International Statute of Secrecy was passed into magical law and the wizarding world was changed forever. Among the unforeseen difficulties imposed by the Statute were certain problems inherent in wizarding criminal justice. Despite the best efforts of the aurors, jailbreaks had always been surprisingly common among the wizarding criminal classes, for few local jails could be built to withstand the power and versatility of magical rescue attempts perpetrated by outsiders even when the inmates had been stripped of their wands. Before the imposition of the Statute, such escapes would result in local authorities, both magical and mundane, joining forces to track down escapees under what British common law would later call *posse committatus*. But after the Statutes' passage, the magic used during such jailbreaks risked drawing the attention of Muggles (so named now because it was deemed

essential that such non-magicals be fooled, or "mugged" in the vernacular of the day, into thinking that magic did not exist), and wizarding law enforcement was forbidden to seek the assistance of their Muggle counterparts except in the most extreme circumstances. To address these concerns, the Wizengamot directed the newly established Ministry of Magic to devise plans for a new prison in some remote location from whence escape would be impossible.

During this same time, the British Isles were increasingly plagued by wild Dementors who were eventually traced back to lost and fabled Azkaban. Frightened both by the danger of these Dementors and by their challenge to the nascent Statute of Secrecy, the Wizengamot charged Damocles Rowle, then the Minister of Magic, with addressing both the Dementor threat and the need for a new prison. His solution to both problems pleased virtually no one.

In 1718, Minister Rowle journeyed to Azkaban and somehow initiated a dialogue with a representative of its Dementor population. Together, they brokered the Treaty of Azkaban. The exact text of the Treaty was classified at the highest level by Ministry security, but the general terms are fairly well-known among modern British wizards and witches. The Tower of Azkaban would become the new prison for Wizarding Britain. The Dementors would act as guards under the direction of a skeleton crew of aurors and other DMLE personnel. The Dementors would only give the Kiss to inmates under very specific circumstances but were otherwise free to feed upon the misery of the inmates. And those inmates would consist of every wizard or witch convicted of treason, murder, rape, assault on the person of a member of the Wizengamot or their families ... or nearly any lesser crime upon a second offense. Life imprisonment in Azkaban was also the penalty for escape attempts,

successful or not, from any of the Ministry holding facilities where persons convicted of lesser crimes were detained, while escape attempts from Azkaban itself were punished with the Dementor's Kiss.

While all of those terms are well-known across Wizarding Britain, there were three additional treaty terms that were deemed highly classified information and kept from the public. First, should any prisoner actually escape from Azkaban, the Dementors would have the absolute right to pursue them wherever they might run in order to administer the Kiss, even onto the British mainland itself. Second, the Ministry was *obligated* to ensure a minimum number of magical inmates for the Dementors to feed upon, and from time to time, the Ministry was compelled by its treaty obligations to imprison wizards and witches in Azkaban who would not normally be eligible for such extreme punishment. Over the 175 years since the Treaty was brokered, shortfalls in the necessary prison population were usually satisfied through imprisoning lower class wizards and witches with criminal records and no family connections who could be charged with recidivism no matter how minor their subsequent crimes were. Failing that, the Ministry typically relied on political prisoners or, more rarely, people cursed with enemies rich and powerful enough to bribe the right people. The final secret term held that if the shortfall of prisoners persisted for long enough - defined by the treaty as one year and one day - the treaty itself would become void, and the Dementors would no longer be bound to Azkaban. Those last three terms were deemed of the highest security by the Rowle Administration, and knowledge of them was passed down to a relatively small number of people over the intervening 175 years.

The three people who came to visit Azkaban Prison on the night of July 31st in the year 1993, alas, were not among those privy to those secret terms.

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***31 July 1993***  
***6:00 p.m.***

Seabase Acheron was a raised sea platform which had been installed at the command of Minister Rowle at the start of Azkaban's service as magical prison. So-named because those who first worked the base considered it the entryway to Hell itself, Acheron was situated just outside the anti-Apparation and anti-Portkey wards which covered Azkaban Island. And like Azkaban itself, Seabase Acheron almost never had any visitors other than a semi-annual surprise inspection by the Minister of Magic and the Chief Auror. That the Chief Auror chose to hold the surprise inspection on this day of all days was a very big surprise indeed.

After Chief Auror Potter, Minister Fudge, and their bodyguard, Auror Michael Proudfoot, arrived with a pop on Seabase Acheron's apparation platform, they waited for several minutes in the cold North Sea drizzle before the aurors stationed there arrived to "greet" them. Several of the guards who came running up were still adjusting their clothes, and one poor sod was still trying to put on a boot while hopping pitifully in their direction. Those in the lead initially had wands pointed in the direction of the intruders, but while none of the Azkaban staff had actually met James Potter yet, they'd all seen his picture by now, and they immediately stowed their wands. One particularly startled auror actually tried to give a salute with his wand still in his hand, with the end result that he nearly stabbed himself in the eye with it. While Fudge tried to hide a smile, Potter was far less amused as he glanced down at a pocket watch.

"Three minutes, twelve seconds before a single auror showed up after an unannounced and unauthorized apparation," Potter said contemptuously. "I'm not impressed so far."

"We'll work harder to live up to your expectations as we move forward, Chief Auror," came a voice from the doorway to the building nearby. Then, a stocky older wizard with a fierce expression stepped out, and the aurors parted to make way for him. "I am Warden Stark, chief of this facility. I don't believe I've ever had the pleasure of meeting any of you distinguished gentlemen in person, though of course, Minister Fudge and Chief Auror Potter need no introduction. Nevertheless, identity papers, please."

Fudge reached into his pocket – causing the assembled aurors to stiffen and prepare cutting hexes – and removed a scroll which he handed over. "We're here for the annual inspection."

"How interesting, considering our last annual inspection was five years ago. I despaired of living long enough to see another one." The Warden carefully reviewed the paperwork which all seemed in order. Then, in a startlingly smooth move, he flicked his wand out of its holster and pointed it directly in the face of James Potter. "Your wands, gentlemen. There are protocols to be observed, after all. And I'll have the briefcase too, Minister Fudge."

Potter narrowed his eyes somewhat angrily. Then, he drew his wand and handed it over butt first. Fudge and Proudfoot did likewise, the latter with obvious nervousness and discomfort.

Fudge, on the other hand, seemed almost amused by the proceedings. "I'd appreciate it if you wait until we're out of

the rain before you search the briefcase, my good man. I have files in there I'd rather not see waterlogged." The guard who took the case nodded.

"I'm just happy to see that there *are* protocols to follow based on what I've observed so far," Potter said with a degree of contempt.

The Warden smirked. "Yes, I've no doubt you're pleased to think you've caught us with our trousers around our ankles, Chief Auror. However, the situation was perfectly under control."

"It hardly looked like it," the other man replied.

"That is because you mistake us for the guardians of Azkaban instead of its overseers. Our entire conversation has been observed by personnel in the top of the tower by the duty officers with whom I am in constant communication. Standard protocol, naturally. Had I but given the word or had you done anything the tiniest bit threatening to me or my men, you lot would have about twelve seconds before a score of Dementors showed up to give you a good look at what they keep under their hoods. As for my men down here whom you've caught in a something of a disarray, it is only because you arrived right in the middle of the annual birthday fete we hold to commemorate the victory of your son, the Boy-Who-Lived, over You-Know-Who. However, if that much ... frivolity offends you, I suppose we can abolish it going forward and just let the Christmas feast be our only celebration here." He paused and then gave Potter a sneering smile. "Unless, Chief Auror, you want us to cancel Christmas too."

Without waiting for an answer, Stark turned and headed on into the bunkhouse. The others followed, with the Azkaban

aurors holding Potter, Fudge, and Proudfoot at wandpoint. Inside, the trio found themselves in a circular room with a metal grate for a floor. The other aurors surrounded the trio and stood with their backs against the wall. Then, Stark gave out a command, and a deluge of bitterly cold Thief's Downfall poured in through another grate in the ceiling. All three visitors cried out in surprise and shock. After five seconds of this, the downpour stopped, but the aurors kept their wands trained on the now-drenched trio. Casually, Stark removed his own pocketwatch and began timing.

"Kindly remain still, gentlemen, for another twenty seconds. I wouldn't want one of my men to become alarmed at some furtive movement and slice your head off. We don't use Stunners at Azkaban."

The three men stood perfectly still save for bitter shivering before Stark finally put his watch away. "All clear. No Imperiuses or illusions. No immediate signs of Polyjuice." He nodded with mock respect towards Fudge and Potter. "Mind you, we *will* be waiting for a solid hour before proceeding to the prison itself, just to be on the safe side. *Protocol*, you know."

He turned and headed towards a heavy door. "Get them dried off and then send them to my office." At his command, the aurors stepped forward and administered Drying Charms followed by Pepper-Up Potions. Proudfoot swallowed his with a faint but detectable nervousness at the Warden's words, but if they troubled either Potter or Fudge, neither man showed it. Moments later, all three were in Warden Stark's office partaking of lukewarm tea and stale biscuits.

"My apologies for the quality of our libations, gentlemen. One of the many side effects of proximity to Azkaban is that



most foodstuffs tend to lose their taste quite quickly. Indeed, I suspect that our little supper we were holding in Jim Potter's honor will be nearly inedible by the time I can return to it."

Potter frowned at that, but it was Fudge who finally spoke. "With all due respect, Warden Stark, your conduct towards us since our arrival, well, frankly flirts with insubordination."

Stark snorted. "I don't flirt with insubordination, Minister. I grab it round the waist and kiss it so deep I can massage its tonsils." Then, he leaned forward in his chair. "I have been the Warden of Azkaban for *fifteen years*, Fudge. Three times longer than the longest serving of my predecessors, seven of whom died by their own hand over the centuries since this hellhole was refashioned into a prison. In fact, my *very first* official action as Warden was to scourgify my predecessor's bloodstains off the walls of my new living quarters. If you find me insubordinate when I register my displeasure with you pompous lot staging a surprise inspection right in the middle of our Jim Potter Day festivities, by all means, replace me ... if you can find someone to take the job."

Potter studied the man carefully and recalled what he knew about him. Matthias Stark had been an exemplary auror back in the late 1970's, but Death Eaters had wiped out his entire family - a wife, three children (and their spouses), and seven grand-children in the space of just a few months. The Healers at St. Mungo's refused to clear him to return to active duty, but after the last Warden's suicide, no one else would accept the position that Stark himself had sought out and claimed with apparent gusto. Potter met the man's gaze steadily, but for the life of him, he couldn't tell whether Stark had stayed on at Azkaban for fifteen years because of

his devotion to the cause of the Ministry and of Justice ... or because of the personal satisfaction he took from overseeing the torment of the Death Eaters condemned to the prison. And even if it was the latter, was such sadism the result of losing his family to Death Eaters? Or losing his happy memories to Azkaban?

"Warden," Potter said, "obviously we got off on a poor footing for which I apologize. As you know, *last year's* Jim Potter Day saw a terrorist attack on my son and others by means of a Death Eater weapon. It was the same attack that maimed my predecessor for life and forced him from his position. And today is the anniversary of that attack."

"I am well aware of these events, Chief Auror," Stark said coldly. "Rufus and I have had opportunity to discuss them at length."

"Ah," thought the other man, "*Stark is friends with Rufus Scrimgeour. That would certainly explain his attitude towards me. Pity it's too late to be someone else.*"

"We're here tonight, Warden," James said aloud, "because in the year since, we have no further information on who staged that attack and why. It was my hope that, under cover of a '*surprise inspection*,' we can interview the members of You-Know-Who's inner circle with Veritaserum and perhaps get some useful intelligence without causing any sort of panic or press overreaction."

Stark sat back in surprise. "And you don't think that the media will notice you leaving your son's official birthday fete to visit Azkaban and ask questions?"

"Let them," Fudge replied. "If anyone does notice, our story is that James wanted to do a snap inspection on his son's birthday to prove that he would not let his role as Jim's

father and protector distract him from his official duties. Besides, as you've noted, today *is* one of the nation's busiest holidays. It would make sense to do a surprise inspection at a time when your security might be under unusual stresses or otherwise distracted. But our hope is that the *Prophet* will simply focus on all the other human interest stories arising from today's festivities and not even notice we're here."

Stark nodded. "I suppose that does make sense."

"So with that in mind," Potter said, "we'd like to start our '*security review*' with the Maximum Security Wing."

"That shouldn't be a problem," the Warden said, "once we've finished clearing you for admittance to the facility. We have another forty minutes left to confirm that none of you is a Polyjuiced intruder, followed by transport to the top of the tower and then *another* quick dunk in some Thief's Downfall." He smirked at their dismayed looks. "Security protocols. I'm sure you understand."

The men did, for they had been studying the Azkaban security protocols thoroughly for most of the summer. Their plans demanded it.

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**23 June 1993**  
**Longbottom Manor**  
**(29 days ago)**

*After some amiable chit-chat over brunch (Jim noticed that Augusta and Harry both resolutely avoided asking how his parents were doing), the three boys headed upstairs to get their broomsticks. Harry tarried in the rear, and before he left the sunroom, he turned back to Augusta.*

*"How long should I keep him occupied?" he asked quietly.*

*She glanced up at the wall clock which read 11:15. "Until sunset if possible. I'll have a house elf send you a picnic lunch around two o'clock."*

*Harry nodded and followed his friend and his brother upstairs.*

By 11:30, all three boys were out of the house and would be for some time. From the parlor window, Augusta watched them as they flew happily over the topiary garden. Then, she drew the curtains and moved to the fireplace where she tossed in some floo powder.

"Malfoy Manor," she said. Barely a moment later, Lucius Malfoy poked his head through the fire. "They're gone. You may come through now, though I remind you of the oaths you sworn while in Longbottom Manor and the price you will pay if you are foresworn."

Lucius nodded gravely. "I fully understand." With that, he stepped through the fire into the parlor with a leather satchel at his side. Augusta sat down in a nearby chair, and Lucius sat opposite her across a coffee table.

"I must say, Lord Malfoy, that I was ... impressed by the urgency with which you requested to meet with me. Not to mention the stringency of the oaths you were willing to swear before I would allow you to enter. If I may be blunt, what business could the Houses of Longbottom and Malfoy possibly have in common that could be so important to you?"

"In all honesty, Lady Augusta, that rather depends on whether or not you are familiar with this item." He reached

into the satchel and withdrew a book which he placed on the coffee table facing her.

***The Anathema Codex.***

"Ah," she said quietly, "I see."

"You are familiar with this work?" he asked, only mildly surprised at her calm and poise. Lucius had always thought Augusta Crouch Longbottom had been Sorted incorrectly.

"Archie and I had no secrets from each other, and there were ... trust issues between him and his brother Algernon. Also, I was the second oldest child of House Crouch in my generation, and it had been our family's policy to make certain at least two family members knew of the book, if not its contents. Now, what relevance does that accursed tome have to our discussions, Lord Malfoy?"

He took a deep breath. "Perchance, m'lady, did you ever have opportunity to read the passages about ... *horcruxes*?"

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**Azkaban**  
**31 July 1993**  
**7:15 p.m.**

Fudge, Potter, and Warden Stark spent the next forty minutes making idle chit-chat about the state of Wizarding politics and the likelihood of Death Eater resurgence, while Auror Proudfoot sat quietly off to the side and occasionally made furtive glances towards the clock on the wall. Halfway through, an auror entered with Fudge's briefcase and informed the Warden that the case had contained several files, a few quills and an inkpot, and a number of vials containing Veritaserum and Pepper-Up Potions.

Fudge smiled. The most dangerous moment, as he saw it, had passed.

"The Pepper-Up is for me," he said genially. "The North Sea air disagrees with me. I'd rather not catch a cold if I can avoid it." Fudge's reasons for bringing Veritaserum were not expanded upon in front of the auror, who Stark dismissed without further comment.

Once the hour had passed, the Warden led the trio out to the dock on the side of Seabase Acheron that faced Azkaban Island. There was a small sailboat waiting for them, one that hardly seemed up to the challenge of crossing the choppy waters. To the visitors' surprise, however, the self-propelled boat made it about twenty feet away from the dock before suddenly becoming airborne. Within a few minutes, the flying vessel had made its way to the top level of the grim tower and "docked" next to a small balcony.

Once disembarked, the trio as promised was led through another thoroughly frigid dousing of Thief's Downfall and then forced to stand in front of a large oval mirror in which their reflections appeared nude but with any metal or wooden objects on their person still visible. Finally, they passed through to the command center where their wands and Fudge's case were returned.

"Alright, you lot," Warden Stark addressed the aurors in the command center. "Our guests are here on business, so let's hop to it." Then, he moved over to the center of the room where there was a circular hole in the floor roughly fifteen feet across. Stark activated the Sonorous Charm and then called down the hole, his voice reverberating through the entire prison.

"THIS IS WARDEN STARK. TWO SECURITY PERSONNEL AND THREE APPROVED GUESTS WILL ACCOMPANY ME TO LEVEL TEN. NO DEMENTORS ARE TO RISE ABOVE LEVEL THREE UNTIL ORDERED OTHERWISE OR UNLESS THERE IS A LEVEL 3 OR HIGHER DEVIATION FROM PROTOCOL. SECURITY CODE ALPHA-HIPPOGRIFF-NINER-TWO-FARAMIR. CONFIRM!"

Curious, Auror Proudfoot moved over to the hole and looked down. Then, he staggered back as if struck by vertigo. The hole appeared to cut all the way down the center of the fifteen-story tower, and staring down into the depths made his head spin. Nevertheless, he leaned over for another look just in time for a terrible rasping voice to rise up from the depths below.

*"[I/WE] ReCogNIZe sECuRiTyyyyyyyyy CoDe [HATE YOU!].*  
*[I/WE] CoMPreHenD InStrUc-StrUc-StrUc-TioNs*  
*[HUNGER FEAST CONSUME!].*  
*[I/WE] ShaLL OooooobeY [ALL SOULS MUST MUST BE*  
*DEVoured!]"*

The voice and its sick mixture of obedience and vicious bile was disturbing enough. What made it worse was that Proudfoot suddenly realized that he had not heard the Dementor speak with his ears but in his head. And what made it worse still was that the Dementor spoke with the voice of his long-dead (and much hated) grandmother.

"Have you faced a Dementor before, lad?" Stark asked quietly and with much more kindness than he had shown so far that day.

"No," Proudfoot replied. "But I can do the Patronus Charm."

"You don't know if you can do a proper Patronus in front of a Dementor until you're actually in front of one. No amount

of theory can prepare you for such an experience. But don't worry. As long as I and my men are on hand, you will be safe. And besides, the Dementors will obey their orders. You have nothing to fear so long as you do nothing to break protocol."

Proudfoot nodded very slowly at that. The Warden turned to his men. "Abernathy. Brown. With me. Wands out." Then, Stark led the assembled group to a nearby lift door which he unlocked by touching it with a brass rod attached to his belt by a chain. Seconds later, the six men were descending down into the bowels of Azkaban Prison.

"Well, Chief Auror," Fudge said softly and with some amusement. "Are you satisfied with the prison's security protocols so far?"

Potter nodded. "Very much so. Everything so far is exactly as it should be."

Behind them, Proudfoot swallowed nervously once more as he thought about what protocols he and his co-conspirators were about to break.

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## **Longbottom Manor**

21 July 1993

1:10 p.m.

(10 days ago)

"This?! This was the job offer you wrote me about?!"  
Marcus spluttered in a fury. "A bloody *JAILBREAK FROM AZKABAN?!"*

Harry pursed his lips. In retrospect, he'd hoped to ease Marcus into joining their little conspiracy. Lucius, however, decided instead to rip the band-aid off by leading with the



fact that what they planned constituted an act of treason for which they themselves could be sent to Azkaban for life if they got caught. And the likelihood of that rose considerably if they didn't have at least one more participant who was proficient with the Patronus Charm.

Marcus took a deep breath to calm himself. Then, he shook his head. "I swore an oath of secrecy and I'll stay bound by it. But I want no part of whatever madness you've got cooked up." Then, he met Harry's eyes. "And I hope you'll reconsider your own involvement, Harry. You're ... you're better than this."

With that, he turned back towards the doors, while behind him the conspirators looked back and forth at one another, with "Mr. Cato" in particular looking intently at Harry. Just as Marcus reached for the door handle, the other boy finally spoke.

"Voldemort is still alive."

Marcus froze instantly. For a second, he felt dizzy, like his hand was at once inches from the door handle and also miles away.

"You're lying," he whispered just loud enough for the others to hear.

"In 1981," Harry continued, "his physical body was destroyed. But he survived in a kind of spirit form through the use of cursed objects called horcruxes into which he'd put pieces of his soul. Two years ago, he possessed Quirinus Quirrell and used him in a failed plot to steal an artifact from Hogwarts that would restore his body. Jim stopped him with my help. Last year, one of his horcruxes fell into the hands of a Hogwarts student. and Voldemort possessed *him* as well. It was really Voldemort who was

responsible for everything that happened including all the petrifications. He was also the one who was really that prank on the Slytherin Quidditch team that almost saw us get frozen to death and Jim Potter blamed for it. Again, Jim and I put a stop to it, but if we'd been thirty minutes later, Voldemort would have returned and probably killed everyone at the school."

"Well," Lucius interrupted, "probably not *everyone*. I'm sure he'd have stopped to speak with the children of his former servants to see if any would swear loyalty to his cause."

Marcus whirled around angrily. "I would *NEVER ...!*" But the words caught in his throat. "*Wouldn't I? The way I was raised, if the Dark Lord had shown up in the flesh?!*"

"We will never be rid of him," Harry said calmly, "until someone tracks down his horcruxes and destroys them all. And right now, other than Voldemort himself, the only people alive who might know *anything* about them are in the Maximum Security Level of Azkaban Prison."

"But why is that *your* job?!" Marcus spat out. By now, he was physically shaking. "Just tell the DMLE what you know and they can legally get whatever information you need!"

"We can't take the risk," said the Asian man. "Death Eaters who escaped punishment during the War have infiltrated the Ministry at its highest levels." He glanced towards Malfoy. "No offense."

"None taken," Lucius said dryly.

"As a consequence," the other man continued, "if any of those hidden Death Eaters found out about the existence of horcruxes and located one belonging to the Dark Lord before we finished destroying them ..."

"Who *are* you, anyway?"

"I won't be revealing that until you've taken a few more secrecy oaths, my boy, but when I was wearing another face, I used to be your DADA instructor."

Marcus looked at the man as if he were insane. "Whatever. This is still crazy. It's ... it's something a Gryffindor would do!"

"Marcus," Harry said calmly. "Gryffindors do what's right. Slytherins do what is *necessary*. We need you for this. Please, help us."

Flint shook his head and then rubbed his face for a few seconds. "*The Dark Lord! Alive!*" he thought. "*What would Old Ironside do?*"

"What's your plan?" he said in a nearly broken voice.

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***Azkaban***  
***7:40 p.m.***

The lift's descent was slow, and the grinding of ancient rusty machinery, punctuated by the occasional scream or plea for mercy from beyond the lift doors, only made it seem longer. Finally, the doors opened up to a large circular room with holes in the middle of the floor and ceiling. About twenty cells ringed the room along the exterior wall, twelve of them occupied. Instantly, the newcomers were nearly overcome by the smell of waste and the pitiful moaning of the inmates. Well, mostly moaning. Potter detected one female voice among the din that was ... *singing*? And then, with a sick feeling, he realized that he recognized the voice.

"Who do you want to start with, Chief Auror?" Stark said.

"Sirius Black," Potter replied, his voice tight.

Stark barked out a harsh laugh. "Of course. Silly of me to ask." He led the group over to a particular cell. Within, a painfully thin man with long stringy black hair, a scraggly beard, and a dingy prisoner's uniform was seated on the floor. The walls of his cell were covered with markings. The most prominent were crude depictions of a stag and what looked like two dogs that had been carefully etched into the back wall. Around them were hundreds and hundreds of tiny hash marks, presumably meant to denote how long he'd spent in the cell. Finally, interspersed among the hash marks were three words repeated over and over again.

*"I'm Sorry Harry."*

In response to the group's approach, Sirius Black looked up and his eyes widened. "I *-cough-* I know you," he said with his eyes fixed blearily on James Potter. "You're my *brother*."

Potter's breath caught in his throat, while Stark shook his head. "This is Chief Auror Potter, Black. You will show him respect."

But Sirius ignored the Warden completely. "Yes *-cough-* my brother ... in all but blood. My brother ... who was more ... of a brother ... than my *real* brother." Then, with a sudden flurry of movement, Sirius scurried over to the edge of his cell and grasped the bars.

*"James! Please! Fight it! Remember the truth! Remember that it was Wormtail who betrayed you! Not me! WORMTAIL!"*

James turned to the Warden with an inquisitive look on his face.

"Yes," said Stark, "he's been ranting off and on about '*Wormtail*' pretty much since he got here. By any chance do you know who he's talking about?"

The other man shook his head. "Not a clue."

At that, Sirius let out a low moan and started beating his head with his fists. Then, he suddenly looked up at Potter with a suspicious expression. "You're not James! Who *are* you?!"

Stark sighed. "Quite mad, I fear. I don't see how you'll get much useful information out of him. Or any of them really."

"It's a long shot," Fudge agreed, "but right now, it's all we have. Now, what's the *protocol* for opening the cell doors so we can administer the Veritaserum? I don't seem to see any locks on the doors."

"YES!" Sirius screamed. "FINALLY! GIVE ME VERITASERUM! ASK ME ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED THAT NIGHT!"

Stark flicked his wand angrily, and Sirius was flung back against the far wall. "Not another word out of you unless you're spoken to, *Black*! Or else I'll have a Dementor up here to spend the night right outside your cell door. You don't want to go through that again, do you?"

The prisoner said nothing but just slumped back down to the floor. Potter narrowed his eyes angrily at the Warden before wiping his face clean of emotions. The Warden didn't notice as he'd already turned back to Fudge while producing the plain brass rod he'd use to activate the lift.

"We open the cells with this, Minister. A single touch with this will open any cell in the prison."

"One key for every cell?" the Minister said in surprise. "That seems a bit lax."

Stark smiled. "The key is linked to my biomagical signature. If anyone else even touches it, the alarms are triggered and the prison goes into lockdown." He took a step towards the cell with the key raised. "Now, shall we begin? We don't have all night."

"Truly spoken, Warden Stark," Fudge replied as he glanced towards Potter and Proudfoot. Then, in a blur of motion, he produced his own wand and aimed it at the Warden's back. "**STUPIFY!**"

The Warden dropped like a stone, as did the other two guards who were taken completely by surprise. In his cell, Sirius sat up in sudden shock, and immediately, James Potter turned his wand on the prisoner.

"Sorry, old man," he said almost sadly as he fired off a Stunner. "It really will be better this way."

"Proudfoot, guard the pit," he ordered. Then, he and Fudge nodded to one another before heading around the circular chamber, stopping in front of each inhabited cell to stun the prisoner inside. Some begged for mercy or freedom, some screamed obscenities or just gibberish, some seemed utterly oblivious, but all went down the same. When Potter came to the lift doors, he cast the strongest Colloportus Trimendium he could before continuing on his route. Meanwhile, Proudfoot stood guard nervously over the hole in the floor. Suddenly, a hideous rasping sound echoed up from the Pit some ten stories below. Proudfoot shifted his wand grip nervously.

"I ... I think they're coming," he said as his voice cracked.

"They must have sensed our use of magic," Potter replied without taking his attention from the Death Eaters he was busy stunning into submission so that none would have any memories of events. "Breach of protocol and what-not. Still no alarms, yet, so we shouldn't have anyone coming from above. When you can see them, cast your Patronus."

Finally, Potter and Fudge met up at the opposite side of the room, where the maximum security level's sole female prisoner waited. Within, Bellatrix Black-Lestrange was rocking back and forth, giggling inanely while singing what sounded like a children's song in a disturbing "little girl" voice.

*"Dead Muggle, dead Muggle, swinging in a tree  
How many dead Muggles do you see?  
Tongues turned blue and faces gone grey  
Watch them all as they twist and sway!  
AHAHAHAHAHA!"*

Potter stared aghast at the madwoman. "Well, this is just ... *disturbing*," he finally said.

Fudge snorted as he stunned the woman. "You have a gift for the understatement," he said drily.

"Uh, they're definitely coming now!" Proudfoot exclaimed, his voice rising in terror. From somewhere below came the sound of furious chittering. "I ... I'm sorry ... I don't ... I don't think I can..."

Potter quickly moved to stand beside the younger man, and he placed his hand reassuringly on Proudfoot's shoulder. Then, he leaned in and whispered. "It's alright, *Marcus*. Just remember. Everything you've ever wanted will be yours if you can just make it another hour."

The young man bit his lip and nodded. Then, both of them pointed their wands down into the hole and cast together. "***EXPECTO PATRONUM!***" In response, two blasts of silvery fog shot from their wands down towards the approaching Dementors who screamed in terror and fury.

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**22 July 1993**

The Flint Home

Noon

(9 days ago)

Marcus had waited until lunch to tell his mother and father that he had accepted a new job and would be moving to Hogsmeade. To be honest, he'd stayed up most of the night unable to sleep. And while he'd planned to say something at breakfast, Aries Flint had slept in, as was usual for the mornings when his hangovers were particularly bad.

Marcus's mother, Alisandre, took the news well and was as congratulatory as she could be without provoking Aries's anger, which was a practice she'd been familiar with for most of their marriage. Not that it mattered. Aries himself was already furious.

"This is about that nonsense of you getting into the Auror Academy, isn't it, boy!?" Aries snarled.

"If I get in, I get in," Marcus replied. "If not, I'll do something else. Either way, I've got prospects now, and at least I won't be mooching off your coin, which you've been complaining about since I was a child."

Aries' eyes widened in anger. "Are you disrespecting me, boy?"



"Not at all, Da'. I'm just telling you my plans and letting you know that I'm no longer your concern. I'd thought you'd be pleased to see the back of me."

Aries snorted. "I will be, you useless lump. You with your fancy book learning and your prefect's badge. Thinking you're so much better than us."

"I don't think anything of the kind, Da'." And if Marcus put a little too much emphasis the word "think," it went right over his father's head.

A few insults later and Marcus had had enough. He rose from the table and flicked his wand, and a few seconds later, his already-packed trunk and his broom floated down the stairs.

"I'm going now," he said.

"An *auror*! As if the Academy would ever take a *Flint*! And even if you got in, do you really think being an auror would save you *when the Dark Lord returns*?!"

Marcus turned back to his ranting father, a flash of anger in his own eyes. "The Dark Lord will *never* return! And if somehow he does, I will be *honored* to raise my wand against him!"

He turned back to leave ... only to be caught by surprise when his father grabbed him roughly by the shoulder, spun him around, and sucker-punched him in the face. Marcus fell to the floor, stunned for a moment, at which point Aries kicked him a few times.

"Aries! No!" Alisandre screamed.

Aries yelled at his wife to shut up and then turned back to continue his assault, only to freeze when he saw his son looking up at him in a murderous rage. And with his wand pointed at his face. Without breaking eye contact, Marcus rose to his feet. Then, he put his wand away before walking right up to his father to look him in the eye.

For a second, Marcus felt a strange dislocation. He'd not been this physically close to Aries in a long time and not looked him in the eye for longer. "*When did I get taller than Da'?*" Marcus wondered in surprise. "*Has he shrunk or something?*" Then, he shrugged off the feeling.

"Hit me again," he said aloud in a low dangerous voice. "Go on, Da'. Hit me. I. Dare. You."

But Aries didn't hit his son again. Because for the first time since his son's birth, Aries found himself afraid of Marcus. After a brief staring contest, Aries finally looked away, his face suddenly flushed. Then, Marcus went to his mother and kissed her on the cheek before moving to pick up his trunk.

"I won't be back here," Marcus said with finality as he walked out of the Flint home and into his future.

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## ***Azkaban***

### ***7:52 p.m.***

"Remember, no corporeal Patronus. Nothing to identify us." Proudfoot nodded again even as his brow furrowed in concentration. Then, Potter shouted over his shoulder. "Oh, *Minister*. We can't do this for very much longer. Plus, we're making a bit of a ruckus now. We don't want the aurors to simply fly down from the top level on broomsticks, now do we?"

"Noted," Fudge said tersely. By that point, he had returned to his briefcase and extracted the inkwell which he'd opened and turned over, letting the ink pour out onto his hand. After a second, something solid came out as well: a small spherical object coated in black ink. He dropped the inkwell and pulled out his wand to cleanse both the item and his hand with a Scourgify. Within seconds, the object was revealed to be a luminous black pearl, which Fudge promptly tossed towards the open hole while casting a spell upon it. "**ENGORGIO MAXIMUM!**" In a flash, the pearl expanded to enormous size so that it completely blocked both the hole in the floor and the one in the ceiling. Potter and Proudfoot stepped back.

"And that's going to hold both the aurors and the Dementors?" Proudfoot asked dubiously.

"It's an Antipodean Black Pearl. It can withstand dragonfire. Anything that could damage it before we're done would probably destroy the whole tower in the process. It would be easier to dig a hole through the floor or wall and they're both transfiguration-resistant."

"Still," said Potter. "No reason to dawdle. Potion?"

Fudge pulled a potion vial from his bag and tossed it over. It was one of those that the guards on Seabase Acheron had identified as Veritaserum but which was, in fact, Draught of Living Death. The potion's true nature had been concealed by several very expensive and highly illegal vials often used by magical smugglers and criminals to make contraband potions look innocuous.

"The key is going to be a problem," Fudge said. "Can metamorphmagery duplicate a biomagical signature?"

"Nope," Potter replied. "Which means we are now officially on a tight schedule."

As he spoke, he moved to the unconscious body of Warden Stark and retrieved the brass key. Instantly, a deafening klaxon went off. Potter ignored it and touched the key to Sirius Black's cell, causing the cell door to vanish. He tossed the key to Fudge and entered the cell. There, he fed a few drops Draught of Living Death to Sirius Black before checking his vitals with a diagnostic spell. Satisfied, Potter touched his wand to Sirius's forehead and began the transfiguration.

Normally, full-body transfiguration of living human beings was incredibly difficult and taxing even for masters of the art. Transfiguration of the dead, however, was no more difficult than transfiguring any other inanimate object. And luckily for all concerned, a living body put into stasis with Draught of Living Death was "dead enough" for transfiguration purposes. Ten seconds later, Potter exited the cell carrying a small red brick with the name "S. Black" stamped onto it which he deposited in the Minister's case. Across the room, Minister Fudge was transfiguring Rabastan Lestrangle into a similar looking brick.

Four minutes later, bricks representing Sirius Black and all three Lestranges were stowed away in Fudge's brief case. However, it was clear that time was growing short. There were sounds of spellfire coming from outside the lift door and from above the giant pearl, while the room had grown bitterly cold from the presence of what was likely an army of angry Dementors on the floor below. Fudge took a moment to pass out the three "Pepper-Up Potions" which were actually disguised Calming Draughts that would aid in resisting the Dementors' effects. Then, Fudge and Potter

converged outside the cell of the last prisoner they would have time for today.

"Are you absolutely sure we need him?" Fudge asked.

"I hate to say it, but other than Sirius, he's probably the one we need *most*."

Fudge frowned but then gestured for Potter to open the door. Then, he went inside and stunned the unconscious man two more times for good measure.

"Is that really necessary?" asked Proudfoot anxiously.

"Yes," Fudge replied tersely. He knelt and fed a few drops of the Draught of Living Death to the prisoner before casting a diagnostic spell. His eyes widened slightly, and then he poured more of the elixir down before casting the spell again. "Shit!"

"What?" Potter asked urgently.

"It's not working. He still has residual brain function *despite* being under Draught of Living Death."

"That's impossible!"

"That's *Rookwood*," Fudge hissed. Then, he sighed in frustration. "We won't be able to transfigure him. Can the portkey handle his additional weight?"

Potter hesitated. "It should, but there will be little room for error. It is an experimental portkey after all."

Fudge nodded and then waved his wand all over the unconscious Augustus Rookwood. Instantly, his prison garb was transfigured into a heavy straightjacket that bound his

arms tightly. With another wand-wave, the prisoner's food tray wrapped itself around his head and transformed into a heavy iron mask that both blocked Rookwood's vision and prevented any sort of speech.

"Is he really this dangerous?" Proudfoot asked nervously.

"Other than the Dark Lord," Fudge hissed angrily, "there is only one man alive I fear. And against my better judgment, I am about to free him from prison!"

Meanwhile, Potter had retrieved Fudge's briefcase and removed a parchment from within. He placed it on the floor of Rookwood's cell and then cast an overpowered Finite at it. Instantly, it resumed its true form: a large area rug within which a number of runes had been woven, runes that George Weasley would have recognized at once. He then laid the briefcase in the center of it and transfigured it into a steamer trunk into which the unconscious and bound Rookwood was unceremoniously dumped.

"We'll leave from in here. It's farthest away from the lift and there's an empty cell on each side. Less chance of anyone getting hurt, whether auror or prisoner."

"Your concern for convicted murderers is touching," said Fudge. "But are we quite certain we don't want to eliminate the other Death Eaters now while we have the chance? Better that than face them in battle later."

"Oi!" exclaimed Proudfoot. "I didn't sign up for mass murder."

Potter hesitated for an uncomfortably long time. "Agreed," he finally said.

"Hmmpf," snorted Fudge. "Life in Australia has made you soft, *Potter*."

"Yeah," the other man replied. "And life with my cousin has made you hard, *Fudge*. Now everyone aboard the carpet. Proudfoot, hold onto the trunk and keep it from sliding around. I'm ... not exactly sure what that will do to the carpet ... or us."

"Hang on," the Minister interrupted. "I need to get the pearl."

"Are you mental?!" Proudfoot exclaimed. "The aurors and Dementors will get in if you do that!"

"If this *experimental portkey* upon whom we've staked our freedom, reputations, and lives can't get us out of here fast enough to evade Dementors, then we were always doomed anyway. Meanwhile, the pearl is not only a priceless art object for which I paid *200,000 galleons*, it's also *something that can be traced back to me if it falls into the DMLE's hands!*"

And with that, Fudge fired off a Finite and an Accio in quick succession. The pearl shrank back to its normal size and then flew into Fudge's hand. Instantly, the temperature plunged as a horde of furious Dementors poured into the room like a black storm cloud full of cruelty and hate. Despite himself, Proudfoot screamed in terror.

"NOW!" Fudge yelled.

"CUE DRAMATIC ESCAPE!" Potter shouted to activate the portkey. The nearest Dementor was less than a foot away when suddenly there was a sizzle of electricity, a strong smell of brimstone, and a blinding flash of light. And from the deck of Seabase Acheron, the aurors who were

mustered on deck and preparing to send reinforcements looked up in astonishment as a massive explosion shook Azkaban Tower and blew a huge gaping hole in the exterior wall right where the Maximum Security Level should be.

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***From a letter dated 24 July 1993  
(8 days earlier)***

*RAB -*

*As you claimed, the modified Polyjuice Potion you provided lasts for roughly three times the normal length and is completely resistant to Thief's Downfall. However, the total duration of the transformation effect is inconsistent, and I would not rely on it for more than 150 minutes. More importantly, when the effect ends, the drinker will be overcome by violent nausea that lasts for nearly a day. In the immediate aftermath (roughly the first fifteen minutes after termination of effect), the sickness is so severe that spellcasting is impaired. I absolutely would not risk Apparation while under the side effects. Luckily, I know a portkey artificer who would be willing to provide us with conventional portkeys and even submit to Obliviation if the price is right.*

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**Longbottom Manor**  
**9:30 p.m.**

"My Lady," the house elf Hoskins said with appropriate pomp and circumstance, "your guests have arrived."

Momentarily, three exhausted figures, two of whom seemed quite sick, entered the study where Augusta and Harry



waited. The trip had been arduous due to the understandable paranoia of the travelers – they had taken a total of three portkeys (in addition to the experimental one that had enabled their escape from Azkaban .. and that had later started a small fire in the Galloway Forest upon its arrival there) on a circuitous path around the British Isles, pausing at each new portkey site to carefully erase any magical evidence of their passage. They had also paused for fifteen long minutes to transfigure their clothing into something less conspicuous and, in the case of "Fudge" and "Proudfoot," to allow the effects of their modified Polyjuice Potions to wear off. There had been much vomiting involved.

"Success, gentlemen?" Augusta asked without looking up from her solitaire. Harry was less relaxed and actually shot up out of his chair when Regulus, Lucius Malfoy, and a green-looking Marcus Flint burst into the room, with a large steamer trunk floating close behind. Flint, in particular, looked like respect for the expense of the Longbottom carpets was all that kept him from getting sick once again.

"Qualified success, m'lady," Lucius said in a shaky but dignified voice. "Rookwood is ... contained, but not as completely as the others. I believe you indicated that you had a suitable storage place if that became an issue?"

She nodded. "Hoskins, show our guests and their ... luggage to the dungeon."

"There's ... a dungeon here, Lady Augusta?" Harry asked in surprise. Actually imprisoning the retrieved Death Eaters had not been part of the plan.

"The foundations of the manor date back to the original Longbottom Keep which was built in the 7th century. The first Lord Longbottom was, well, a bit of a blood-thirsty warlord by modern standards, but probably no more so than the rest of the old Wizards Council. I suppose the dungeons have been kept intact all this time because his heirs wanted a reminder of how civilized they've become. Or perhaps they were just concerned that civility might not always last and it was best to be prepared for future barbarism."

From a nearby padded chair, Marcus downed a Stomach Soother Potion and then sipped gently from a snifter of brandy that Harry had handed him.

"I still can't believe you talked me into this," he said to Harry almost reproachfully.

"Was it that bad?" Harry asked.

"Bloody Dementors were almost close enough to touch me because Lord Malfoy had to reclaim his *special magic pearl!*" Marcus shook his head. "No offense, Lady Longbottom, but I surely wish Neville could have come with us. We could have used his Patronus."

"I had two ironclad conditions before I agreed to participate in this mad scheme," Augusta said, returning to her solitaire as if nothing had changed. "One was that Neville would have nothing to do with this and would never even know about our role in it."

Marcus nodded. "And the other one?" he asked out of curiosity.

"That none of the Lestranges leave here alive," she said as if discussing the weather. Marcus gulped and then returned

to his brandy.

Moments later, Regulus and Lucius returned from the dungeon.

"Rookwood is stored safely away," Reg said. "He's bound in chains and a straight jacket, gagged, blindfolded, and under Living Death. Plus, just in case he has any awareness of his situation, his mask is Charmed to sing a song called '*Tip Toe Through the Tulips*' on a continuous loop. If that's not enough to keep him from being a problem, then we might as well give up now."

"And on that note," Lucius said. "I must depart for home. Draco returns tomorrow from his visit with his little Muggleborn friend." He paused and then let out a soft laugh. "Which is something I could not have possibly ever saying imagined a year ago."

"So what's next?" Marcus asked blearily.

"We take a few days off to recuperate," Regulus answered. "Make sure there's no fallout from the jailbreak that might change our plans. Then, we'll meet up with the Legilimens Harry has recommended. If he's up to snuff and will agree to the necessary oaths, we can hopefully start interrogating the Death Eaters by the end of the week."

"There will be no fallout," Lucius said confidently. "The hard part is over. I expect everything to go smoothly from here on out."

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***1 August 1993***  
***From the front page of the Daily Prophet***

***!DEATH EATERS ESCAPE FROM AZKABAN!***  
SIRIUS BLACK! BELLATRIX LESTRANGE!  
THE LESTRANGE BROTHERS! AUGUSTUS ROOKWOOD!  
YOU-KNOW-WHO'S ENTIRE INNER CIRCLE!  
WHO WILL SAVE US FROM THE DEATH EATER MENACE?

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***3 August 1993***  
***From the front page of the Daily Prophet***

**WIZENGAMOT TO ENTER EMERGENCY SESSION!**  
**MINISTER FUDGE TO DEMAND REINSTATEMENT OF**  
**DEATH EATER LAWS!**  
**CALLS FOR NEW AUTHORITY TO DEAL WITH DEATH**  
**EATER MENACE!**

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***5 August 1993***  
***From the front page of the Daily Prophet***

**DEMENTORS UNLEASHED!**  
FUDGE UNVEILS CONTROVERSIAL NEW PLAN!  
WILL USE DEMENTORS TO GUARD HOGWARTS AGAINST  
DEATH EATER MENACE!

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***5 August 1993***  
***Malfoy Manor***

Lucius Malfoy sighed as he reviewed the days headlines.  
"Well, for some definitions of '*smoothly*,' I suppose.

# Reactions & Overreactions p1

## CHAPTER 8: Reactions and Overreactions (pt 1)

### The Ministry of Magic

4 August 1993

8:30 a.m.

With a tremendous *whoosh*, Harry Potter passed through the green flames of the floo at Longbottom Manor and stepped into the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic. Lady Augusta followed behind, while Artemus Podmore was waiting on the other side for them both. Once through, Harry paused to look around in wonder. He had never been to the Ministry before, but so far, it lived up to his expectations. The Atrium was a massive cavernous area decorated in an art deco style. Around its perimeter were scores of brightly lit floos from whence scores upon scores of Ministry personnel came and went. Until he saw for himself just how packed the Atrium was even this early in the morning, Harry had never truly appreciated just how many witches and wizards were Ministry employees.

Then, he relaxed his Occlumency and looked again, using senses both more nuanced and more obscure than mere vision.

Suddenly, all around him, Harry could feel an undercurrent of tension and fear. Of the people moving around the Atrium, perhaps one in four had their wands out and gripped tightly in their hands as if expecting an attack at any moment. High on the walls of the four corners of the Atrium, balconies had been hastily constructed for use by auror sniper detachments armed not with wands but with magical battle staves that had previously been mothballed

since the end of the Wizarding War. At the far side of the Atrium, just past the garish bit of statuary known as the *Fountain of Magical Brethren* was the entryway to the Ministry proper which was now guarded by two ten-foot-tall security trolls. The behemoths growled softly at the nervous wizards and witches standing in line for magical identification, as if they were waiting for a chance to smash a Death Eater with the clubs they carried. For just a second, Harry was overcome by a miasma of barely restrained panic before he reasserted his Occlumency shields and dialed down his developing Legilimency senses. Luckily, Mr. X had warned him about the danger of large crowds at this point in his training, and Harry was able to shake off the brief but stifling emotional resonance as his solicitor stepped forward.

"Good morning, Harry. Lady Augusta," Artie said genially.

"That remains to be seen, Solicitor Podmore," Augusta said grimly. "An '*Emergency Session*' of the Wizengamot? Those have never ended well in the past, and I fear today's will go no better."

The magical solicitor nodded. "True. However, this does represent an unusual opportunity for Harry here to see the Wizengamot in full session. Usually, that only happens while he's away at Hogwarts. I do wish you'd consented to allow young Neville to come today for the same reason."

"Neville is abroad," Augusta said with a touch of coldness, as if to remind Podmore that he was not *her* solicitor and had no say in Neville's upbringing. "Given the history between the Longbottoms and Lestranges, that is where he will stay until this situation is resolved or he returns to Hogwarts, whichever comes first."

In fact, immediately after news of the Azkaban jailbreak had made the papers, Augusta owed a letter to Neville in Africa forbidding him to return to Longbottom Manor until further notice, supposedly out of concerns that the Lestranges might still have the means to bypass the Longbottom wards. She also instructed Reginald Longbottom to secure their African farms and keep a low profile until she contacted them again, either when the Lestranges had been recaptured or when it was time for Neville to return to Hogwarts, whichever came first. Of course, if things went according to plan, the Lestranges would *never* be recaptured by the Ministry or indeed be heard from again. Still, it was the exact same thing she'd have said and done had she *not* been a part of Regulus's conspiracy, and so it was fully in character for her.

As the trio left the floo, Harry and Artie stopped off at Ministry Munchies for a quick danish and pumpkin juice while Augusta left straight away for the Wizengamot level to change into her official robes.

"So how are you holding up with all this pandemonium?" Artie asked before biting into his breakfast.

Harry shrugged noncommittally. "To be honest," he lied easily, "it hasn't affected me at all. Certainly not like it has Neville or Lady Augusta."

"Hmm, well it's certainly affected your father. My understanding is they kept him in an interrogation room in his pajamas and bathrobe for several hours on Sunday morning after the jailbreak. Him *and* the Minister too."

"Really?" Harry replied with a trace of a smile. "How ... awful that must have been. But surely no one seriously

thought that the Minister and the Chief Auror were really behind it all."

"No, but it took that long to rule out either a Confundus or the Imperius. Your father will be delivering his report today. Then, we'll see what the Ministry has to say for itself. My concern is that Fudge will be rattled enough and angry enough to propose something truly unwise."

"You don't like Fudge, do you?"

Artie frowned. "*Like* has nothing to do with it. If the Death Eaters are back, then he's probably the wrong man for the job, but there's not much that can be done about that now. And in his defense, Fudge himself knows perfectly well that he shouldn't have the job and fell into it by accident."

Harry gave him a questioning look, so Artie took another sip of pumpkin juice before relating Fudge's political background.

"In 1990, Millicent Bagnold declined to run for a third term as Minister due to health issues. Albus Dumbledore was asked to stand for the office, but he refused in favor of staying at Hogwarts. That left the way open for Bartemius Crouch Sr. to run virtually unopposed. Fudge at that point was an up-and-coming junior minister with the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes. He threw his hat into the ring for Minister of Magic, but everyone understood that he was just trying to build name-recognition for some future office, most likely to get appointed head of the DMAC under a Crouch administration."

"So what happened?" Harry asked.



"The Quibbler, of all things! It had always been an offbeat, satirical publication, but back then it wasn't as, well, *patently silly* as it is today, and it still regularly published serious pieces along with its customary strangeness. Five weeks before the election, the Quibbler ran an expose about Crouch's son, Barty Jr., a Death Eater who died in Azkaban after receiving a life sentence from a judicial panel headed by his own father. The story painted Junior as a well-liked and genial Ravenclaw who fell in with the wrong crowd because his father neglected his family in favor of his politic ambitions. It also suggested somewhat luridly that Crouch's wife had died of a broken heart after her husband callously ensured the death of her only child. Most of the facts of Junior's case were well-known already, and the whole thing would have blown over had Crouch not completely overreacted. He gave an interview to the Prophet in which he said that when he was Minister, he'd look into having Xeno Lovegood thrown into Azkaban for sedition! That, in turn, led to more stories that cast some of his more ruthless decisions as head of the DMLE during the War in a fairly negative light."

"Such as?" Harry asked.

"Oh, where to begin. You are aware, I suppose, that during the latter days of the War, aurors were authorized under the Death Eater Laws to use Unforgivables?" Harry nodded.

"Well, prior to 1990, very few people outside of the DMLE and the Wizengamot understood just how freely those aurors had been permitted to use those forbidden spells. Most common wizards assumed that the law only allowed them to use the Killing Curse in self-defense and had no idea that aurors were also permitted to use the Cruciatus in interrogations and even to use the Imperius on captured suspects for things like leading aurors past the defenses of Death Eater safe havens or even betraying and attacking

other Death Eaters. It wasn't exactly classified, but the number of Unforgivables cast by aurors and the situations in which they were cast had mostly gotten swept under the rug. And Barty Sr. personally authored the legislation that allowed aurors to use Unforgivables and then wrote the DMLE guidelines governing how they could be used in the field. It shouldn't surprise you to hear me describe them as *lax* guidelines."

"But then, the Quibbler pulled that rug away and showed what was hidden underneath."

"Just so. Crouch may have been fervently opposed to the Death Eaters, but he was also ruthless and reactionary. A Muggleborn might have even described him as *fascistic*. And unfortunately for Crouch, he had made it a point to remind everyone of what sort of Minister he might make at the worst possible moment."

"And so everyone voted for Fudge, instead," Harry said.

"Oh, not everyone. The election of 1990 – a contest between a ruthless and unlikable authoritarian and an amiable dunce – was one of the closest in the history of Wizarding Britain, with unsupported accusations of vote-buying and other improprieties on both sides. I voted for Fudge, but it was a protest vote. I'd honestly expected him to lose. Crouch only conceded when Fudge agreed to appoint him Senior Minister for the Department of International Magical Cooperation and also Britain's chief delegate to the ICW, two titles that gave Crouch international authority that trumped that of the Minister of Magic when dealing with international wizarding affairs."

"Wait, so Fudge just *bought off* his chief rival? And everyone knows about it?"

Artie shrugged. "That particular form of influence peddling isn't actually illegal under wizarding law. In fact, it's basically a tradition for an incoming Minister to reward whoever finished second with a prominent position of some sort. Usually, it's just a ceremonial one, but Crouch was certainly qualified to be Minister for the DIMC, and it's a position where he couldn't do much harm to Fudge's domestic agenda or personal popularity. But I digress. The end result was that Fudge, basically an okay but inexperienced fellow, unexpectedly landed in the Minister's chair and has been winging it ever since. And worse, though Fudge has never been a blood purist – or if he is, he's hidden it well – his base of support consisted heavily of suspected Death Eaters who were hellbent on keeping Crouch out of the Minister's position. Now to his credit, Fudge has made a point of relying on a diverse group of advisors but especially Albus Dumbledore, and as far as anyone knows, he's never taken any personal bribes."

"*Personal* bribes?" Harry interrupted. "What other kind is there?"

Artie chuckled. "Usually '*donations*' to Fudge's pet causes. Which again is not technically illegal so long as he doesn't personally benefit from those causes. Other than sales taxes levied on wizarding goods and services offered by privately-held companies, nearly all of the government's income is derived from fees that wealthy families pay to maintain their Wizengamot privileges. Since the rich elites are basically paying for the government anyway, it's generally considered acceptable for this or that family to donate large sums of galleons for particular government projects. This family pays for a new wing for St. Mungo's. That family pays for new dragon-hide armor for the auror corps. Etcetera etcetera. And it's only proper, in most people's eyes, for

them to get certain *special considerations* in exchange for their largesse."

"This is probably just because I'm Muggle-raised, but wizarding culture sounds incredibly corrupt."

The older man shrugged. "It's a matter of perspective. The Muggle government taxes everyone and so, in theory at least, has to pay attention to everyone's wants, although it's not a surprise that it pays more attention to wealthier people than the poor. Among wizards, you need galleons to fund government projects, but the wealthy wizards are the only ones who have that much in liquid assets and so bear the brunt of taxation. Most common wizards don't have a lot of currency because they don't need it. With limited exceptions for food and shelter, magic can give you whatever you need to survive. If you know how to apparate, you can transport yourself almost anywhere. If you're good with Transfiguration, you can make most everyday items you need. If you know the Reparo Charm, nearly anything tangible you buy will last a lifetime or longer. In all of Diagon Alley, there are only four stores that sell clothing because only rich wizard-folk – or wizard-folk who want to be *perceived* as rich – bother to pay for clothing produced by other wizards instead of simply transfigured out of used garments. I believe the comparable Muggle term is *post-scarcity society*. Most wizard-folk only need galleons in large quantities if they decide to operate a business of some kind, and they usually get the money from investors among the old rich families."

Harry wasn't entirely sure what *post-scarcity* meant, so he made a mental note to ask Hermione about it later. "So basically, most wizards and witches can take care of their own personal needs without any aid from the government, but for big ... *society stuff*, I guess, the Ministry provides it

and pays for it with taxes mainly paid by the wealthiest families in exchange for 'special favors'?"

"A crude but accurate summation," Artie said. "And if you think Fudge is bad, you'd have hated Millicent Bagnold. She was the one who signed off on dismissing all charges against dozens of marked Death Eaters who claimed with little supporting evidence to have been under the Imperius. She concluded that Sirius Black's confession made convicting most of them an impossibility, so she agreed to dismiss most of the remaining prosecutions if those accused paid out enough galleons to essentially rebuild our whole society after a decade of constant destructive warfare."

Artie glanced at his watch. "But we can continue the history lesson later. We'd best head towards the gallery. There's still a long line at the security check point."

"Will we get there in time?" Harry asked.

"No fears, Harry," Artie said with a slight grimace. "*Roll call* will probably take a full hour."

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**9:00 a.m.**

***An opulent London high-rise apartment overlooking the Thames***

Blaise Zabini had only just risen from his bed when he heard the soft pop that marked the arrival of his temporary "house guest." He frowned at the clock. The thought of being up this early during his summer vacation was appalling, but Harry had asked for his help, help that Blaise had reassured the other boy that only he was capable of giving. Indeed, Blaise was quite certain he knew exactly what Harry Potter needed in this instance even if the other boy did not. And so the boy pulled on his robe over his

pajamas and sauntered into the living room where the Countess's "British" house elf, Domo, was standing guard over the new arrival. From Harry's description, the twitchy terrified elf who Domo regarded so suspiciously could only be ...

"Dobby, I presume," Blaise inquired.

The poor creature practically jumped at being addressed by a wizard. "Y-y-yess, I's is being D-D-D-D-Dobby, sir," he said in a cringing tone before handing a letter of introduction over to Domo who snatched it up, checked it for baleful magic, and then handed it to Blaise. The boy reviewed the note which, as expected, was a letter from Harry confirming that this was his elf Dobby and that he was placing Dobby into his care for a few days for "*training*." Oh, and that Harry would be very, very cross if any harm came to Dobby or if he were mistreated any more than he already had been at Malfoy Manor back before Draco stopped being a git. Blaise snorted softly and pocketed the letter.

"Do you understand why you are here, Dobby?" he asked.

Dobby nodded violently. "Because ... because ... DOBBY IS A WORTHLESS STUPID HORRIBLE EXCUSE FOR AN ELF!" And with that, Dobby began to wail and weep piteously. Next to him, Domo said nothing but rolled his eyes to register his disdain for the display.

"Zip it!" Blaise said forcefully, and instantly, Dobby gained a measure of control over himself, though he did make a point of blowing his nose on the hem of his dingy tea towel tunic.

"You are here," the boy continued, "to learn how to be a proper servant for Harry Potter. Do you *want* to be a house elf worthy of Harry Potter?"

"Oh yes!" Dobby said excitedly. "Master Harry Potter is the greatest most wonderful wizard in all the world! Dobby would do anything ...!"

"Zip! It!" Blaise snapped again. "Harry Potter has sent you to me because he trusts my judgment about what is needed to make you a proper servant for him. And believe me when I tell you that only the best, most perfect servant is what Harry Potter needs right now. Nothing less will do. Are you willing to trust me as your master does and follow my instructions regarding how to serve him better?"

Dobby swallowed deeply. "Dobby will follow Master Harry's friend's wisdom."

"Good." Blaise turned to the other elf. "Domo, you may return to your duties. I will take breakfast at 9:30 out on the balcony. Fruit Loops with whole milk and a carafe of fresh orange juice, if you please."

"At once, Master Blaise," Domo said with approval for Blaise's menu choice. Then, he glanced over to Dobby and lifted his chin haughtily before disappearing with a pop.

"Right. Come over here, Dobby." Blaise led the elf over to the other side of the room, where sat many strange and arcane objects the likes of which Dobby had never seen before.

"This ... is *technology*, Dobby. Specifically, a big screen TV and a VCR. Think of it as Muggle magic. It is not compatible with your magic, so you must not touch any of this yourself, or you might damage it. But on this screen will be projected moving pictures that will tell stories to show you how best to serve Harry Potter. When one story is finished, come and find me, and I will swap out the videotape for another. Do you understand?"

Dobby nodded affirmatively. Although he knew nothing of TVs or VCRs, the basic instructions so far were within his grasp. Blaise then removed a videotape from a plastic case and inserted it into the VCR before holding the tape case so that Dobby could see its front cover.

"Do you see these two Muggles, Dobby? Good. Now, as you watch the show, I want you to pay particular attention to these two people. And I want you to imagine that this thin man is Harry Potter, and that this larger man who is his servant is *you*. Try to imagine responding to your master as this servant does to his. Do you understand?"

The house elf furrowed his brow. "Dobby thinks so. Dobby will do his best."

"Good. Now, sit comfortably and watch the whole program." With that, Blaise pressed the play button and then returned to his room to shower and get dressed, while Dobby sat on the floor and watched the television screen in wonderment as a jaunty fiddle and bass tune began to play and words appeared as if by magic.

STEPHEN FRY & HUGH LAURIE

as

JEEVES & WOOSTER

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***The Wizengamot Chambers***  
***9:45 a.m.***

After a long wait in the newly-installed security line, Harry and Artie were finally allowed in, and Artie led the boy down into the bowels of the Ministry of Magic to the lowest



level where the Wizengamot had already begun its Emergency Session.

"How can the Ministry possibly maintain a ten-story structure underneath *Whitehall* without Muggles having any idea?" Harry asked. "We're not that far from the Thames. Why doesn't this place flood? Or at least feel ... damp?"

"Magic?" Artie replied with a wink.

"You know, Artie, after a while it gets old hearing '*magic*' offered as an answer to every serious question."

"Fair enough, Harry. How about '*ancient powerful centuries-year-old magic using master-level spatial expansion and Notice-Me-Not Charms backed by the combined magical power of all the ancient oaths sworn by the original Wizengamot families.*' Oh, and master-level water-proofing Charms as well, I suppose."

"See? Was that so hard?" Harry said with a smile.

"Excruciating," Artie replied drily.

Though innocuously labeled simply as "Courtroom 10," the Wizengamot Chamber was roughly the size of the Hogwarts great hall but circular in shape. The public viewing gallery where Harry and Artie entered consisted of a single large balcony blocked off by various charms, wards, and spells to prevent observers from interfering in any way with Wizengamot proceedings. Even sounds were blocked, so observers could talk freely without being heard by those below. The viewing gallery overlooked an open area called the Well, which presently housed several tables set up for use by Chief Auror Potter, DMLE Director Bones, and Minister Fudge, along with their various adjutants.

Immediately, Harry noticed that while most of those officials seemed tense but otherwise comfortable in their surroundings, one of the Minister's assistants seemed a bit out of place, and she continually looked around the chamber as if she could not quite believe where she had found herself. The woman appeared middle-aged, short, and a bit stoutish, and Harry immediately decided that she bore an unfortunate resemblance to a giant toad. Then, he chastised himself. "*Appearance is no guarantee of character or competence,*" as Salazar Slytherin himself had noted in his memoirs, and Harry decided that it was unSlytherin of himself to judge the toad-woman on that basis. For all he knew, she might be a very nice lady.

Chief Warlock Albus Dumbledore sat behind an enormous judge's bench situated on a high platform that loomed over the Well opposite the viewing gallery. Harry was strangely pleased to see that his Headmaster had eschewed the plum-colored robes worn by the rest of the Wizengamot in favor of the eccentric garb he wore everyday at school. Today's robes were particularly bold and featured an eclectic mixture of chartreuse and ultramarine. Directly beneath the Chief Warlock's desk but on the same general level were seats for a court reporter (who also acted as a sort of bailiff) and a records keeper. In front of *them* but on a lower level was a row of desks allocated to half-dozen or so Ministry officials who held Wizengamot votes by virtue of office. Harry was startled to see Ludo Bagman sitting in that section looking simultaneously confused and bored, but then he remembered that the Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports was, inexplicably, among the offices with an ex officio Wizengamot seat. There was a dour and serious man sitting next to him who seemed visibly annoyed at the seating arrangements to judge by the look of disdain he had for Bagman, and Artie soon identified

the older man as the very same Bartemius Crouch Sr. that they'd been discussing earlier.

Behind Dumbledore stood a set of double doors from which the Wizengamot members had emerged. Surrounding the Well of the chamber on either side of the Chief Warlock and the Ministry seats were three levels of box seating arranged in concentric arcs. The bottom row was for Order of Merlin recipients. To his surprise, Harry noticed an unusually grim Arthur Weasley in that section, wearing official plum robes far nicer than anything he'd ever seen the man wearing before. The middle row was for the Noble Houses and the top row for Ancient and Noble Houses. Immediately, Harry noticed that there were quite a few empty boxes, especially on the middle tier, and he asked his solicitor about them.

"The Wizarding War hit the Noble Houses particularly hard," Artie said. "Of the fourteen Noble families that have gone extinct as of 1981, only two have been replaced in the years since. Plus, there's House Greengrass which has been elevated to Ancient and Noble status and has left an open spot on the Noble row as a result."

"So why haven't they filled those seats yet?" Harry asked.

"Because they can't come to a consensus on who should have them. Think about it. With all those seats empty, the families who are still represented have more power because they control a greater percentage of the votes that can actually be cast. Filling those empty seats would dilute their power, even more so if they are filled with new families allied with their enemies."

Harry nodded and looked around the visitor's gallery, the large balcony overlooking the well of the chamber across from the Chief Warlock's seat. During this particular

session, the visitor's gallery was open only to members of the press, certain non-voting government officials, and family members and agents of seat holders. So Harry was not terribly surprised to see Draco Malfoy ("Or now Drake, maybe?" he wondered) sitting off to one side watching the proceedings. He was rather surprised to see who Malfoy was sitting with – their Muggleborn classmate Justin Finch-Fletchley!

After a few seconds of consultation, Artie left to speak to some colleagues while Harry made his way to his fellow students, both of whom greeted him warmly.

"Before we go any further, are we using '*Draco*' or '*Drake*' now?" Harry asked.

"Well, we're observing Wizengamot proceedings, so I think Draco would be best in here. My father's still not completely adjusted to my proposed name change."

"Fair enough. Also, Justin, please don't take this the wrong way, but ... how did you get in the door?"

Justin smiled. "Draco's father did a thing."

Harry crooked an eyebrow and then turned to Draco. "You've been teaching him how to speak Slytherin."

"We had a busy summer. He taught me to play cricket. I taught him how to be evasive."

Harry chuckled as he sat down next to his two friends. "So what have I missed?"

"Not much," Justin said. "The roll call is taking forever. We're only up to the M's."

"Speaking of which ..." Draco said.

Below them, the elderly court reporter called out in a thin reedy voice. "The Wizengamot calls Malfoy. Who stands?"

From a box on the top row, Lucius Malfoy stood and answered. "Lucius Lord Malfoy speaks for the Malfoy Seat. Twenty-seven votes."

Justin whistled softly. "Twenty-seven votes. That's the most anyone's had so far by a long shot. No wonder everyone at school looks at you funny, Draco!"

"Hmm," said Harry. "Obviously, I slept through History of Magic on the day that Binns actually explained how our government works. Why does your father have twenty-seven votes, Draco?"

"Binns never covered this, Harry, because it falls under the heading of *useful* information. Ancient and Noble Houses get ten votes. Noble Houses get five. Then there is a pool of *reserved* votes that go to Order of Merlin holders and certain lucky Ministry officials. In addition to my family's ten votes, Father still holds fealty from the Crabbes, Goyles, and Parkinsons, so that's four from each of them out of the five to which each of those Noble families is entitled. By an amusing technicality, he also holds proxy for the Lestrangle Noble seat - at least until all of those nutters finally die off - which is another five. Ten plus five plus three fours equals twenty-seven. QED."

Harry nodded. Naturally, he was aware in general of how Wizengamot votes were allocated. He simply had wondered where the extra five votes from the Lestranges had come from. In fact, his worn copy of **Hutchinson's Commentary** had explained the Wizengamot's history in depth. The original Ancient and Noble Houses were

descended from the seventeen powerful Roman families who relocated to the British Isles shortly before Rome's fall, and those families spent the next few centuries either warring with one another, interbreeding with one another, or both, until they finally settled their differences and formed the Wizards Council, the de facto magical government of the British Isles from roughly the 7th century until the Norman Conquest. During that time, only the Hogwarts Founders presented any challenge to their informal rule, though it was indeed a powerful challenge that eventually led to a peace treaty between Hogwarts and the Wizards Council that had held thus far for nearly ten centuries. In fact, the heavy losses suffered by the Wizards Council in their futile attempts to conquer Hogwarts left them open to what came next.

In 1066 A.D., William the Conqueror came a-calling, and in the wake of his successful invasion of Britain, another twenty-nine Norman, Breton, and French wizarding families relocated to William's new kingdom and immediately challenged the power of the Wizards Council. The conflict between the powerful and entrenched Roman families and the younger and more numerous invader families continued for decades, long after the Normans themselves had subjugated Britain. Finally, one member of the Wizards Council whose original family name was now lost broke his family's alliance with the other Ancient families and ultimately engineered a peace treaty between the warring magical factions. The result was the Wizengamot, a new magical government in which all of the families held power jointly but with the member families of the old Wizards Council granted additional voting privileges due to seniority. The "betrayal" family was allowed to hold its Ancient and Noble status, but in a final show of petulance, the other Wizards Council members cursed that family's line so that its true name would be lost forever and

it would only be known as "House Bad-Faith" – or "House Malfoy" in the language of the Norman conquerors.

As he mentally reviewed that ancient history, Harry was only peripherally aware of the pronouncements from Houses MacMillan and Marchbanks (five votes each) and the lack of one from House MacKinnon (the court reporter called the name three times as a formality, but everyone knew the MacKinnon line had been extinct and unreplaced since 1980). But his head jerked up instantly when House Nott was called upon. Tiberius Nott stood for his House. "Ten votes." Then, Lord Nott turned his head in the direction of Lucius Malfoy and sneered. Harry said nothing, though his eyes narrowed. He wondered if Draco knew that within a few months, the votes of Crabbe, Goyle, and Parkinson would likely shift from Lucius's control to that of Tiberius. Lord Parkinson himself stood next and claimed ownership of the one vote he had left (the other four still proxied out to Lucius). The names Peverell and Prince were both called out, again as a formality as they too were extinct, though Harry noticed that Justin stiffened slightly when House Prince was called. Finally, it was House Potter's turn.

"Peter Pettigrew, Esquire, Seneschal and Proxy for House Potter, speaks for the Potter Seat. Twenty-three votes." Justin looked at Harry in surprise, and he gave the other boys a summarized account.

"The Potters are Ancient and Noble and so start with ten votes. James, Lily, and Jim *each* held an Order of Merlin, which is another three votes. And then, it gets weird because somehow James holds the proxy for House Black which gives him *another* ten votes."

James had explained it all to his Heir the previous Christmas. Apparently, Sirius Black, the secret Death Eater who betrayed the Potters to Voldemort, had for some odd reason also provided James Potter with a power of attorney letter granting him complete control over Sirius's legal affairs in the event of the latter's '*incapacity*.' When Arcturus Black died in 1991, Sirius Black automagically became the new Head of House Black even though he was incarcerated in Azkaban at the time. The Ministry investigated Black's affairs, found the power of attorney, and appointed James Potter as Regent for House Black until Sirius Black's eventual death, at which point either the Black seat would go to his heir if a suitable one could be found or the Black line itself would be deemed extinguished. Harry still found it amazing that James could be so certain that Sirius had betrayed him despite apparently entrusting him with the heart and soul of his family's political power.

"Is there a Black Heir?" Draco asked. "Mother said that if I had gone with her instead of Father, there was a good chance I'd become the next Lord Black, but that's out of the picture so long as I remain a Malfoy."

Harry shrugged. "I think it depends on if Sirius Black prepared a will or not. If there's no will, House Black will probably go extinct because there are no males to carry the family name."

"*Unless, of course,*" Harry thought to himself, "*Regulus can get past the hurdle of being both a suspected Death Eater and also legally dead.*"

"If he *did* leave a will," the boy continued, "well, he's still my Godfather, and I do have Black lineage from Dorea Black-Potter. It's possible that I could be the next Lord Black if he



filled out the right paperwork and I was willing to give up my Potter Heir status."

Draco made a face. "It's a good thing I don't hate you nearly as much as I used to." Harry laughed.

"So I guess this makes the Malfoys and Potters far and away the most powerful families in the Wizengamot?" Justin asked.

Draco shook his head with a rueful expression. "Unfortunately no," he said as he pointed back to the court reporter.

"The Wizengamot calls Selwyn," said the elderly wizard. "Who stands?"

From a box on the top row two spots over from Lucius, an attractive and relatively young-looking witch stood to address the Chief Warlock. "Cassilda Selwyn, Seneschal for the Ancient and Noble House of Selwyn, speaks for the Selwyn Seat," she said in gentle dulcet tones. "Thirty-two votes."

"Ancient and Noble, plus *four* cadet lines," Draco said to the other two boys with a disdainful sniff. "The Carrows, Warringtons, Travers and Yaxleys are all families that started as offshoots of the Selwyn line before getting elevated to Noble status, but they've all still sworn fealty to the Selwyns, so that's sixteen votes controlled by the main family. On top of that, they have *five* Order of Merlin holders plus a Ministry-seat holder from among their five families."

Harry turned his attention to Cassilda Selwyn, who spoke for her family but did not claim the title of Lady Selwyn. Although he had only be peripherally aware of the Selwyns for the past two years, he had not realized just how much

power over the Wizengamot the family possessed. He decided now that the Selwyn family deserved more of his attention. In particular, who *was* the current Lord or Lady Selwyn, and why weren't they on hand to claim the family seat personally?

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As the roll call proceeded, Wizengamot pages moved among the various seat holders carrying private messages back and forth. Among them was a single piece of folded stationary delivered to Antonius Warrington. The outside of the stationary bore the Selwyn crest: a white shield with Slytherin-green trim and charged with a red rose whose thorns dripped blood. Beneath the shield was the Selwyn family motto:

*"Oderint Dum Metuant."*

*"Let them hate so long as they fear."*

As casually as possible, Antonius looked around the Wizengamot chamber. Cassilda Selwyn was not looking in his direction. Instead, she seemed focused on reviewing paperwork while completely ignoring both his presence and the pomp and circumstance of the proceedings. With a grimace, he opened up the note carefully, almost as if he were afraid of getting bitten by the paper.

*"Beloved Cousin Antonius,*

*Grandfather has taken an interest in these proceedings as well as other recent family matters.*

He desires a meeting of the five families tomorrow evening.

Dinner will begin promptly at eight o'clock followed by a gathering in the ballroom.

*Of particular interest to our paterfamilias is your son,  
young Cassius.  
Grandfather has some **questions** for him regarding the  
events which  
led to the expulsion of our dear cousin, Miranda Bonnevie,  
from Hogwarts.*

*I so look forward to dining with you and your family.*

*Until then, I remain  
Your Devoted Cousin Cassilda."*

Antonius Warrington stared at the seemingly innocuous note for a long time. So long, in fact, that the court reporter had to call out the name *Warrington* twice before he finally noticed and rose from his seat.

*"/cough/ Antonius Lord Warrington speaks for the  
Warrington Seat. One vote."*

Warrington sat back down stiffly. Then, he blushed slightly in embarrassment as he noticed Corban Yaxley smirking at his discomfort while holding up similar note he had just received himself. Seconds later, Yaxley rose and addressed the court reporter.

*"Corban Lord Yaxley speaks for the Yaxley Seat. One vote."*

The roll call having been completed, the court reporter turned towards Dumbledore.

*"Chief Warlock, 255 votes have been cast to open this  
Emergency Session of the Wizengamot. The quorum of 220  
votes has been met."*

*"So noted,"* Dumbledore said. Then, he pulled out his wand and touched it to a small globe on his desk which lit up in

response. "As Chief Warlock, I hereby call this Emergency Session to order."

And so, with the preliminaries out of the way, the Wizengamot's business began in earnest.

# Reactions & Overreactions p2

## CHAPTER 9: Reactions and Overreactions pt 2.

*Somewhere, Sometime...*

*The little boy had been lost in the woods for longer than he could remember, and as the night got colder, he'd ended up huddled under a tree sobbing quietly and shivering both from the cold and from fear. For he knew that there was a monster after him, a great and terrible monster that would devour him whole if it caught him. Then, the boy gasped in terror as a demonic howl erupted from farther into the woods. It was some distance away, but closer than the last time he'd heard it just a few minutes before. The boy began to weep piteously. He was alone and cold and the monster would be here soon. Then, as that thought rippled through his terrified mind, the boy heard another sound much closer. He turned and saw that the bushes just a few feet away were rustling as some thing pushed its way through them. And the distant howl that had so frightened the boy was now replaced by a different animal sound. A low, hungry growl.*

*The bushes parted, and the boy screamed.*

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***A heavily warded and reinforced chamber deep beneath the Temple of Wisdom in Shamballa  
6:42 a.m. (local time)***

Remus Lupin ("Brother Chandra" to most of his peers at the Temple) awoke with a loud and painful gasp of air before looking around wildly around to find himself nude and alone in a cold, darkened chamber. He gave a relaxed sigh. All

was as it should be. Then, he arose and moved to the locked door, stepping gingerly over the stripped carcass of a yak which had been provided by the monks and upon which his other half had dined heartily in the night. At the door, he closed his eyes and spent several seconds waving his hands in a complicated mudra that would have been beyond either the dexterity or the wisdom of a werewolf. The door clicked open, and Remus stepped through to the lighted antechamber where his clothes and wand were waiting. Naturally, the Alohomora Charm would have been faster and easier, but the risk of leaving his wand where it might be smashed by an anger-crazed werewolf was too great.

The English monk calmly dressed himself and then stepped back into his holding cell to vanish the yak's remains and Scourgify the cell. He made a mental note to spend time meditating in gratitude to the spirit of the animal for its self-sacrifice on behalf of his own mental health. He also made a mental note to gargle as soon as possible to get the taste of yak meat out of his mouth. At this point on his spiritual journey, Remus only ate meat while in the throes of his lycanthropic transformation, and he had grown to otherwise dislike the taste of it, especially when it was still raw and bloody. However, years of study had shown that if the Beast was allowed to slake its hunger for flesh on a sufficient quantity of animal flesh, it was less likely to take out its anger at confinement on its own physical body, and the taste of yak breath was a small price to pay to not wake up half-dead and covered in scratches and claw-marks. Indeed, except for the intense recurring nightmare that came with every transformation just before he woke the next morning, Remus considered his transformations almost consequence free.

From his transformation chamber, Remus climbed the many stairs up to his own rooms, bowing respectfully to all the

other monks who crossed his path, all of whom returned the bow with equal respect. Back in his private chambers, Remus took a quick cold shower and dressed in fresh clothes. When he returned to his sitting room, there was a small tray waiting on his table containing fresh fruit, rice, fish broth, and juice, along with a folded copy of the *Daily Prophet*. Remus smiled. In all his time in Shamballa, he had never actually seen a house elf here, but he knew the Temple had some. Unlike the elves back in Britain, however, the house elves of Shamballa were almost never seen in physical form, preferring to perform their duties silently and invisibly.

The wizard sat at his table, popped a peach slice into his mouth, and opened the paper ... only to spit the fruit out after nearly choking on it.

**DEATH EATERS ESCAPE FROM AZKABAN!**  
**SIRIUS BLACK! BELLATRIX LESTRANGE!**  
**THE LESTRANGE BROTHERS! AUGUSTUS ROOKWOOD!**  
**YOU-KNOW-WHO'S ENTIRE INNER CIRCLE!**  
**WHO WILL SAVE US FROM THE DEATH EATER MENACE?**

Nearly in shock, Remus tore through the article.

"Sirius ... free," he whispered to himself in a flurry of mixed emotions. And if the Betrayer was free, it was a safe bet he might try to pick up where his master had left off. Remus shook his head. It seemed that Jim's training could no longer be left off until the following summer, just as it seemed that Remus's reunion with young Harry could no longer be delayed. He reached for his wand.

"**EXPECTO PATRONUM**," he intoned, and a beautiful silver wolf appeared at his side. "Go to Healer Baskar and the High Lama. Tell each of them that I humbly but urgently

request an audience with them both as soon as their schedules allow." The wolf nodded and then disappeared. Remus swiftly moved to a writing desk from which he withdrew some parchment and a quill that hadn't been used in years.

*"To Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster,  
Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry"*

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**4 August 1993**  
**The Weasley Burrow**  
**Noon**

After a busy morning of de-gnoming the garden, the five youngest Weasley children entered the Burrow for lunch. Percy stopped to turn on the Wizing Wireless just in time for the noon news broadcast.

"Percy," Molly scolded gently. "We don't listen to the Wireless at the dinner table."

"I'm not listening for music, Mum," the boy replied. "There's supposed to be a news update about the Wizingamot hearing."

"Yeah," said Fred with a laugh. "Maybe Dad will get to give a speech."

"Oh, behave, Fred," Molly said with some irritation. "This is a very important meeting, and it's a great honor for your father to be there among the Order of Merlin holders." Before she could say any more, the music on the wireless faded away to be replaced by the dulcet tones of the lunchtime newsreader for the Wizing Wireless.



*"Good afternoon, witches and wizards. This is Alcmene Doolittle with the twelve o'clock news. It has been four days since the daring jailbreak from Azkaban that has riveted the entire nation. Thus far, the DMLE has no leads on the fugitive Death Eaters, which include Sirius Black, Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrangle, Bellatrix Black-Lestrangle, and Augustus Rookwood. Should any of our listeners have any information on the whereabouts of the escapees or the unknown individuals responsible for their escape, we urge you to contact the DMLE at once. For the moment, the DMLE advises that Magical Britain's threat level is rated as 'Red-Severe.'*

*The Wizengamot is currently in recess for lunch and will resume deliberations at two o'clock. This morning's session was brief but contentious. After the Calling of the Rolls and the ceremonial renewal of the Vows of Unity, the reports of the DMLE and the Auror Corps regarding the escape were presented, followed by a brief but spirited question-and-answer period. DMLE Director Amelia Bones began the report by officially clearing Minister Fudge, Chief Auror Potter, and Auror Michael Proudfoot of any involvement in the escape. Immediately thereafter, a point of order was raised by Lord Yaxley as to whether Polyjuice Potion was used and, if so, whether it spoke to a failure of security on the part of the DMLE that hair samples from such illustrious personages could be obtained so easily by enemies of the state.*

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***Approximately one hour earlier...***

James stiffened slightly at the implied rebuke from Yaxley, a man he was almost certain was an unmarked Death Eater.

"Our preliminary investigation indicates that the three intruders responsible for the breakout maintained their forms after at least two hours and two separate exposures to Thief's Downfall," James said, referring to the report on the table in front of him. "This would seem to exclude the use of Polyjuice Potion. Accordingly, we are proceeding under the assumption that the intruders were a trio of Metamorphmagi."

Up in the gallery, Harry's brow furrowed. While it was to the benefit of Regulus's conspiracy, he was surprised that the DMLE had dismissed the possibility of an improved Polyjuice so completely. Then, he realized that they probably hadn't dismissed it at all but were simply downplaying that possibility to prevent panic. Better the nation think that there were three rogue shapeshifters than a possible army of them that were immune to detection.

"Chief Warlock, I rise to a point of inquiry," said the venerable Griselda Marchbanks. The ancient witch rose stiffly to her feet, as she was recognized by the Chief Warlock. 'I was given to understand, Lord Potter, that there is only one known Metamorphmagus in all of Magical Britain, a young woman currently studying at the Auror Academy. Has she been investigated in connection with these monstrous acts?"

"She has, Lady Marchbanks. At the time of the prison break, she was at home with her parents in Hogsmeade." Then, James took a deep breath as Tiberius Nott rose as well. Up in the gallery, Harry's eyes flashed angrily before his mask of perfect calm slipped back into place.

"I also rise to a point of inquiry, Chief Warlock." There was a slight but noticeable hesitation before Dumbledore recognized the man who then turned his attention to the

Chief Auror. "Lord Potter, am I correct in assuming that the young Metamorphmagus of whom you speak is one Nymphadora Tonks, the daughter of Andromeda Tonks ... *formerly of House Black!* Specifically, the sister of one of the escapees, the cousin of another, and the sister-in-law of two more?!"

There was a burst of excited whispers from the assembled peers at the invocation of the Ancient and Noble House of Black, whose seat was currently vacant. From the Chief Warlock's desk, Dumbledore banged his gavel for order.

"And furthermore," Nott continued, "am I not also correct in my understanding that this is the same Andromeda Tonks who currently provides sanctuary to the outcast known as Theodore No-Name!"

That announcement led to even louder commentary and even a few gasps until Dumbledore banged his gavel again and with perhaps more force than tradition allowed.

"The point of inquiry is ruled out of order, Lord Nott," he said firmly and with a hint of coldness. "Whatever else he may be, Theodore No-Name is a child of only thirteen years, and his current housing arrangements are not relevant to this discussion. Likewise, Andromeda Tonks has never been accused or even suspected of any criminal acts against the State or the people of Magical Britain, and she is, in fact, a well-regarded member of the Hogsmeade community with a sterling reputation. The Wizengamot does not adjudicate guilt or innocence on the basis of family history, Lord Nott, *as I'm sure you recall.*"

Tiberius's eye twitched slightly. "... I withdraw the point of inquiry, Chief Warlock," he said tersely before sitting back down.

Then, it was Lord MacMillan's turn to be recognized. Harry knew little about the MacMillans. The MacMillan Heir was a Gryffindor who had graduated during Harry's First Year. He vaguely recalled that the younger son, Ernie, was in his year, but the boy was a Hufflepuff, and Harry was sure they'd never spoken for more than a few minutes.

"Chief Warlock, I rise to a point of order. Director Bones, setting aside the Tonks girl, that still leaves at least two other Metamorphmagi involved in the attack on Azkaban. If there are no other known Metamorphmagi in Wizarding Britain, what consideration is the DMLE giving to the possibility of foreign agents being responsible for the attack?"

Director Bones replied. "The DMLE is considering all avenues of investigation, Lord MacMillan. That said, at this time, we cannot exclude the possibility of involvement by foreign wizards and even foreign governments, though we as yet have no idea as to any possible motive for a foreign wizarding government to free Death Eaters from Azkaban prison."

From across the room, Lord Parkinson (Pansy's father) gave a loud snort of laughter. "With all due respect, Director Bones, I think that bespeaks of a lack of imagination on the part of the DMLE."

Director Bones did not rise to the insult, though her expression made her feelings about Parkinson clear. Dumbledore apparently felt the same, as he ruled the comment out of order and chastised Parkinson for speaking without being recognized. Then, to Harry's surprise, Peter Pettigrew stood up from the Potter seat to make his own point of order. Dumbledore glanced down at James for a

fraction of a second before recognizing the Potter Seneschal.

"With respect to my learned colleagues," Pettigrew said. "I believe it is premature to speculate wildly on the nature of the threat we face when the investigation is only begun. Certainly, we discredit ourselves and this institution if we frighten the wizarding populace with groundless insinuations about foreign invaders working alongside Death Eaters. With that in mind, perhaps it would be best to move on to another matter. Lord Potter, a point of inquiry: Regardless of how the intruders gained access to Azkaban, whether metamorphmagic or other means, does your investigation have any leads on how they were able to *escape* from Azkaban?"

James rose to respond almost as soon as Peter started speaking. After a second, Harry nodded to himself in understanding. He felt quite sure that Peter had asked his question in response to some discreet signal from James in order to divert attention away from something James didn't want to discuss at the moment, most likely something to do with the international implications of the jail break. Idly, he wondered which of the two came up with the stratagem. "*Probably Pettigrew,*" he thought, "*or maybe even Dumbledore.*"

"We do have some leads," said the Chief Auror. "It appears that the intruders have access to some kind of advanced portkey method, one capable of penetrating the anti-portkey wards of Azkaban Prison. Accordingly, we have instituted a crack-down on the illegal manufacture and sale of portkeys by unlicensed distributors."

After that pronouncement – that the (possibly foreign) shapeshifting invaders had access to portkeys seemingly

able to slice through some of the most powerful wards ever devised – it took quite a lot of gavel-banging before order was restored.

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### ***One hour later ...***

*"Although much concern was expressed over the possibility of portkeys capable of circumventing anti-portkey wards, Director Bones and Chief Auror Potter were quick to address fears that such portkeys could be used to penetrate wards on public facilities or private homes. As Director Bones noted, the intrusion into Azkaban Prison required a daring use of shapeshifters to penetrate the prison's security and remain undiscovered for several hours. This, she said, strongly implied that it was not possible to simply portkey into a warded area and that the advanced portkeys simply allowed one to, as Lord Potter phrased it, 'blast their way out.'*

*After the reports were submitted and approved, the Wizengamot adjourned for two hours. When the session resumes this afternoon, it will begin deliberations on how to respond to this terrorist event, including a review of Minister Fudge's controversial proposal to reinstitute the Death Eater Laws which had previously been repealed in 1981.*

*For the Wizarding Wireless News, I'm Alcmene Doolittle."*

George Weasley stared wide-eyed at the Wizarding Wireless for a long moment before heading quickly to the stairs.

"George, where are you going?" Molly asked. "We're about to start lunch."

The boy looked back at her, and Molly was shocked at his gaunt expression.

"I'm ... not feeling very well, Mum. Think I'll go lie down for a bit if that's okay." Then, without waiting for an answer, he practically ran up the stairs. Concerned, Molly started to follow him when Arthur called her name from the floor. As she went to speak with her husband, Percy looked over to Fred and jerked his head in the direction of the stairs.

A moment later, Fred entered the room he shared with his twin, with Percy close behind.

"Right, George, what's going ... on...?" Fred's voice faded away as he took in George's ashen face. The boy was sitting on his bed and staring forlornly at the floor, and he looked like he was on the verge of either bursting into tears or vomiting. Percy moved past Fred to sit next to George. He put his arm on the frightened boy's shoulder.

"George," he said in a gentle voice. "whatever it is, it'll be okay. Just talk to me."

George finally looked up at his brothers. "It's my fault. The bad guys who staged the prison break – they used *my* portkey design to break out. I'm ... I'm a part of all this."

Fred snorted softly. "Pull the other one, Georgie."

"I'm serious!" he exclaimed angrily. "Look, don't you two get it? One of the people who broke into Azkaban was disguised as Auror Proudfoot. The *same* Auror Proudfoot who showed up here to collect my portkey notes and then warn all of us not to talk about it with anyone. *We had a Death Eater in our house! Hell, he was alone with Mum for part of the*

*time!* Who *knows* what he might have done if I hadn't just handed over all my notes like an *idiot!*"

"So you think there's a connection between Professor Lockhart's research projects and the Azkaban breakout?" Percy asked in a soft voice.

"There's got to be," George replied. And then to his surprise, Percy let out a short, slightly hysterical bark of laughter. "What's so funny?"

Percy shook his head and turned to George. "Well, look on the bright side, George. At least you're not the *only* Weasley to have been an unwitting accomplice."

"Eh?" Fred asked in confusion.

Percy looked back and forth between the two twins as he explained.

"The day before Lockhart took a runner from Hogwarts, I turned in my final project for Team Chameleon, the research team working on Polyjuice Potion. My paper was about a theoretical way to extend Polyjuice's duration. It wasn't a particularly safe modification, as it would probably make you quite sick once the transformation wore off. But if the research we all did for Lockhart was used by the people who staged the jailbreak, I reckon I'm as much of an accomplice as you."

He snorted softly. "I guess there goes that Ministry job for sure."

Fred just shook his head. "It's your own fault, both of you. You could have been lazy underachievers like me and just spent the whole year running laps around the castle, but *nooooo!*"



---

***Florian Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor***  
***1:00 p.m.***

"I'm surprised you weren't there this morning," Harry Potter said somewhat mischievously to his twin. "I'd have figured that our parents would want to show you off at Wizengamot sessions whenever possible."

"And normally you would be right," Jim replied somewhat ruefully before taking another drag on his milkshake. "I haven't had to go since I started at Hogwarts since regular sessions happen while we're at school, but before then, I occasionally got dragged to them for special occasions. And if you think an hour or so of just taking roll was boring this morning, imagine having to listen to it when you're *seven* and our Mother has stuffed you into formal children's robes. Luckily, Mum and Dad's paranoia about Death Eater followup attacks against the Wizengamot meant I got to sleep in this morning."

The two boys had a table to themselves at Fortescue's while their parents sat at a separate nearby table along with Artie Podmore. As they talked and drank their milkshakes, the two tried to politely ignore the two aurors stationed nearby as their bodyguards.

"So do you actually enjoy all that political stuff?" Jim continued.

"Enjoyment has nothing to do with it," Harry said. "Politics is part of being a Potter. And if we *don't* work at it, we'll just be ceding more power to the bad guys."

"Hey, I thought I was supposed to fight the bad guys while you did the *boring stuff*," Jim said, recalling their very first

conversation on the day the Potters collected Harry from Privet Drive.

Harry laughed. That conversation seemed so long ago. He'd been so ready to hate Jim, and for a while, Jim seemed eager to earn his hatred. He was glad they seemed to have gotten past all their prior hostility. Of course, he still wasn't ready to forgive James and Lily by any means, and certainly not to the point of giving them the power to interfere with his life again. But if James and Artie could work out an arrangement to guarantee Harry's status, safety, and independence, maybe ...

"We're both Potters, Jim. I think we'll both end up fighting the bad guys in our own different ways." He lifted up his own milkshake. "To fighting the bad guys," he said as a toast. Jim chuckled and raised his own glass to clink against Harry's.

"And speaking of bad guys, what do you think about the jail break?" Jim asked.

Harry shrugged and then launched into the answer he'd prepared before the jail break had even happened.

"Honestly, I'm trying not to think about it. I'm confident that the aurors will get the escapees caught and locked up. And if not, it's because the escapees are already out of Britain, which means they won't be any immediate threat to us anyway. I'm taking too many classes this year to spend any spare time worrying about former Death Eaters who are probably too emaciated and insane to be a threat to anyone."

"Yeah, but if Voldemort is summoning his followers..." Both boys took a second to smirk at the horrified gasps from

their bodyguards who were apparently still too afraid to say the Dark Lord's name.

"Then we'll deal with it when the time comes. But you and I are students. It's not our job to obsess over what Voldemort" /gasp!/ "might be doing. If it comes to that, you'll take him down and I'll be right there with you. But for the time being, I'm more worried about Ancient Runes and Arithmancy."

Jim shuddered. "Brrrr. I think I'd rather fight Death Eaters."

"What are you taking for electives?"

"Divination and Care of Magical Creatures. Easy Outstandings."

Harry snorted. "Well, I'll see you in CoMC, but Divination? Just for an easy O?"

"Not *just* for an easy O," Jim replied. "I *am* the subject of a True Prophecy, if you'll recall. I figure maybe it would be a good idea for me to learn a bit about how those things work."

"And also, it's an easy O."

"Yes, and also it's an easy O."

The twins both laughed.

---

"So you think there's a chance of finally getting all of this resolved?" James asked hopefully.

Artie hesitated. His client had authorized him to discuss possibly resolving the conflict between Harry and his family, but the solicitor was conflicted. On one hand, he thought it would be good for Harry to develop a positive relationship with his parents if it be feasible. On the other, he was not yet persuaded that James and Lily Potter would do right by their son and Heir. He had finally figured out Lily's position. She did care for Harry, but she felt certain that his life would be in continual danger if he stayed close to Jim. That much was clear from how she continually looked over at the table where the boys sat together chatting and eating ice cream, as if she feared that Death Eaters would burst in at any second to claim both boys despite the presence of two plain-clothes aurors just one table away. Her desire for reconciliation was tempered by her barely concealed wish to relocate Harry to the Antipodes to be instructed by trusted tutors in a bunker protected by the Fidelius Charm, even if that meant he never saw the rest of his family again.

James was harder to figure out. At first, back during Harry's first year, Artie had assumed that Lord Potter was simply biased in favor of the Boy-Who-Lived and also hopelessly prejudiced against Slytherins. Now, though, he was certain that James's motivations were more complicated, but Artie still couldn't begin to fathom why he would be so upset at having an Heir as formidable as Harry no matter what House he was in.

"I certainly hope so, Lord Potter," he finally said. "But at a minimum, it would be contingent on Harry feeling assured that his Heir status won't be compromised at any point."

"Why is he so afraid of that?" James asked.

Artie grimaced. "Lord Potter ... Harry is aware of the fact that you tried to disinherit him back in 1982."

Lily's head jerked around, and she glared at James in reproachful surprise. "James!"

"It's not like that, Lily. This was years and years ago, right after we sent Harry away." He turned to Artie. "At the time, everyone assured us that Harry was a squib, but he would still be the legal Heir until he was officially identified as such, and that wouldn't have happened until he was eleven. At the time, the war was still just winding down, and I was a young patrol auror, a very hazardous job. If I had died, House Potter would have needed a regent until Harry either showed magic or failed to get a Hogwarts letter. And I'm sorry, Lily, but I don't think the Wizengamot would have approved a Muggleborn regent for an Ancient and Noble House, and Merlin only knows who they'd have appointed in your place. In fact, at the time, I think my closest Pureblood relative was *Narcissa Black-Malfoy*! But because Jim had already shown powerful magic, if he were the Heir when I died, Peter could have gotten him Lord Conditional status, and then you *could* have held his regency no matter what any of the Purebloods thought about it."

He sighed heavily. "And anyway, I never even got past the initial stages before Peter and I concluded that we couldn't take away Harry's Heir status without revealing his existence and where he was staying to the general public, thereby endangering his life. At that point, I dropped the idea completely."

"I am sympathetic to the situation you were in at the time, Lord Potter," Artie said. "But you must understand how all this looks to the boy. He has every reason to be distrustful to your intentions towards him. And if you truly want a reconciliation, you're going to have to give him assurances. Assurances that, according to my prior conversations with Mr. Pettigrew, you have not been inclined to make."

"Peter has a tendency to be ... overprotective where Jim is concerned," Lily said diplomatically. "This is one of those areas where maybe there's a conflict between his role as Seneschal and his roll as Jim's godfather. That's why I ... we wanted to talk to you for once without his input."

Artie absorbed that information while idly stirring his now melted ice cream. *"Interesting. So Mrs. Potter is concerned that Pettigrew's fondness for Jim is clouding his judgment where Harry is concerned."* Then, he frowned at his ice cream.

"You know, I can honestly say that I've never held a negotiation at an ice cream parlor before. It's oddly discomfiting. I've had a few in the private dining rooms at Summerisle's but never at Fortescue's."

James laughed. "Lily hates Summerisles for some reason. I've tried to get her to try it, but she refuses to set foot inside."

Lily stiffened. "I've tried it, James. It's just, well, I had an unpleasant dining experience there once, and I don't care to be reminded of it."

But then, despite herself, Lily looked across Diagon Alley towards the famous wizarding restaurant and frowned. It had *indeed* been a very unpleasant dining experience.

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## ***Summerisles***

### ***25 July 1976***

*The young Muggleborn girl sat nervously at her table waiting for her "luncheon companion." Although she was in her best dress, she was acutely aware of how her Muggle attire made her stick out against the wealthy magicals in*

*the restaurant in their fine robes and elaborate pointy hats. None of them appeared to pay her any mind, but she assumed at least some of them were whispering "Mudblood" under their breath. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, a figure moved past her and slid into the chair opposite.*

*"I do apologize for my tardiness, my dear," the other woman said. "But thank you so much for coming. I've been looking forward to meeting with you."*

*Lily tried to smile but it faltered on her lips. "Your invitation was most ... insistent, your Ladyship. Not to be rude, but why exactly have you been looking forward to meeting me?" As if the girl didn't already have a general idea. Something to do with the Toe-Rag.*

*"Please, Lily," said Lady Potter almost earnestly. "Call me Dorea. After all, I'm hopeful that you and I will become great friends."*

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### ***The Present ...***

"But enough about all this boring 'escaped Death Eater' stuff," Harry said, diverting the topic. "Have you seen the new Firebolt yet?"

"Not yet. I tried to get Mum to take me by Quality Quidditch Supplies on the way here, but she wouldn't go for it. There was a big crowd around the window gawking at it, and she was worried about safety." Jim frowned. "I think there's going to be a lot of that going on this year. *No, Jim, you can't do that. Safety!* I mean, they haven't even decided if I can leave Hogwarts for Hogsmeade weekends this year. Will you be able to?"

Harry grimaced. "Don't know yet. It depends on Lily and James. The injunction against them forbids them from '*interfering with my education and living arrangements*,' but it's a Hogwarts policy that you have to have a permission slip signed by a parent or guardian to visit Hogsmeade. Then again, other than Zonko's and the Quidditch supply store, there's not really that much to Hogsmeade, or so I'm told. Blaise Zabini describes it as '*a magical hick-town*' and '*Branson, Missouri for wizards*.'"

Jim furrowed his brow. "I don't know what that means."

Harry coughed. "Well, to be honest, neither do I, but it sure sounds depressing."

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"Well, I do think we've made some progress today," Artie said. "I don't think we're quite ready for Harry to move back to Potter Manor for good nor even ready to dissolve the injunction. But I believe that I see the beginnings of a possible resolution of the issues between you two and your son. Perhaps we could meet up again for another such informal meeting this fall. At the Three Broomsticks during a Hogsmeade weekend, perhaps?"

"Well, in light of everything that's happened," Lily replied, "we haven't actually decided whether to sign either of the boy's permission slips yet..."

"Actually, Lily-Flower, I've been giving it some thought," James interrupted. Something in his voice caught Lily's attention, and she stared at him as he continued. "There will be a heightened security presence in Hogsmeade this year. And we can both make it a point to be at all the Hogsmeade weekends to act as chaperones. I really don't



see why we shouldn't allow the boys to enjoy the Hogsmeade experience, do you?"

Lily crooked an eyebrow. They had discussed the matter just the night before, and it had been James who'd voiced the loudest objections, objections he now seemed to have abandoned. James tried unsuccessfully to stand up to his wife's gaze before turning away and coughing softly with an oddly embarrassed look on his face. Lily said nothing but simply studied her husband's face while looking for his usual tells, most of which now seemed to say *"there's something stupid I've done that I'm ashamed to tell you about."*

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***One hour earlier, just as the morning's Wizengamot session ended...***

*"Ah, James," said Cornelius Fudge in a surprisingly upbeat voice. "Well done so far, I think. The morning session went as well as it possibly could have."*

*Potter agreed. "Yes, a lot of the peers are frightened, but they're not panicking yet."*

*"Hopefully, that attitude will continue this afternoon once we're discussing solutions instead of just defining the problem." He turned and looked up towards the Gallery. "I say, is that Jim sitting with Draco Malfoy. I hadn't thought them likely to form a friendship."*

*James followed the Minister's gaze and frowned. "That's my other son, Harry. He's in Slytherin."*

*"Ah, of course. So where is young Jim? I'd hoped to speak with him and reassure him that we were doing all we could for his defense."*

*"He's at home, right now. Lily and I wanted to see how the new security arrangements were working out before we let him come to the Ministry."*

*"A sensible precaution, I suppose. Here in the heart of downtown London, the Ministry's security is still ... questionable. Still, perhaps I'll get to see him at Hogsmeade this year?"*

*James hesitated as he wondered why the Minister of Magic was so eager to see Jim. Then, he realized – Fudge was more interested in being seen with Jim than in just seeing him.*

*"To be honest, Cornelius, Lily and I haven't decided yet about that."*

*Cornelius leaned in closer to Potter. "James," he said in a softer but more urgent voice. "It is very important that we do everything we can to prevent public panic at this moment. Most of the nation looks up to Jim as an icon. I promise that we'll provide whatever security is needed, but if Jim is afraid to go to Hogsmeade, his peers will be too afraid as well, and that fear will only spread." He took a step closer. "These times call for a firm and resolute response, don't you agree, Chief Auror?"*

*James couldn't help but notice the subtle emphasis Fudge placed on the title of "Chief Auror," a position to which he'd risen at an impossibly young age thanks to Fudge's patronage. And also a position in which he served at the pleasure of the Minister.*

*"You raise valid points, Minister Fudge. I will certainly take them under consideration." James said diplomatically.*

*"See that you do, Chief Auror. I'm sure you'll come to the right decision." With that, Fudge warmly squeezed James's shoulder before turning away to talk to some other officials.*

*James exhaled slowly as he considered his boss's words. And for the first time since accepting his position, he noticed the sensation of chains constricting all around him.*

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### ***A supply closet on the Third Floor of the Ministry of Magic***

***1:30 p.m.***

Rita Skeeter was one of the most famous and notorious gossip columnists of her time, with an unique image known to every wizard and witch in Britain who had ever set foot in a bookstore or perused the gossip pages of the *Daily Prophet*. With her platinum blonde hair, stylish (if somewhat overapplied) makeup, ultra-chic clothes from the best shops, and, of course, her famous jewel-encrusted spectacles, practically everyone knew what Rita Skeeter looked like.

What few people knew, however, was that "Rita Skeeter" was just a pen name.

Every good reporter knows that there are times to make an impression and times that call for discretion. And when Rita wanted to be discreet (well, a discreet *human*, anyway), she simply changed her clothes, scrubbed off her make-up, ditched the spectacles (which were purely for show anyway), and cancelled the spell that turned her normal mousy-brown hair into platinum blonde curls. Rita Skeeter disappeared, and bland unassuming Margarite Scarabee (Ravenclaw, Class of 1978) took her place. It wasn't that often, because Margarite Scarabee *loved* being Rita

Skeeter, but unfortunately, some of her contacts – in fact, most of her *better* contacts – preferred not to meet with her when she wore such an infamous mask. Indeed, her *very best* contact was quite adamant about the matter.

Which explained how the plainly-dressed and utterly forgettable Margarite Scarabee found herself in a storage closet on the third floor of the Ministry of Magic, eating scones and drinking warmish tea with Eleanor Burke, personal secretary to Chief Auror James Potter.

"So they really don't have any clue who's responsible?" Margarite asked. She did not take notes, as Eleanor was insistent that there be no easily verifiable record of their conversations, a sensible precaution in light of the quality of secrets the old witch regularly provided.

"Not a clue," Eleanor said. "The blackboard in Potter's conference room has twenty-seven names of suspects on it, all of them completely speculative." The old witch reached into a pocket and produced a parchment upon which the twenty-seven suspects were written in block printing that left neither a magical signature nor a recognizable handwriting that could be traced to her. "Of course, I've got my own theories, but Chief Potter hasn't asked me for anything more than to fetch the tea."

"Who do you think was behind it?"

Eleanor took a sip of tea. "I have no proof or anything, but I'm leaning towards Tiberius Nott."

Margaret was surprised. "Why him?"

"You recall last summer when someone sent the Boy-Who-Lived a cursed choo-choo train for his birthday that nearly killed him?" The reporter nodded. "That train was one of

Erasmus Wilkes' little projects, which means that someone has taken an interest in the Toymaker's works. And by an interesting coincidence, Vera Tessmacher over in records told me that Lord Nott has quietly filed a sealed marriage contract with Wilkes' only surviving family, his daughter ... Amelia or Amanthia or something like that. There's got to be some connection there, and anyway, to take the extreme step of marrying someone so young, he must think that doing so will give him power over the Wilkes estate. I'll wager he knows where a fortune in galleons is hidden. Maybe even a mega-fortune in purified orichalcum, plus Merlin knows what sort of dark objects. Wilkes was known for that, and if Nott is after it, he may have believed that You-Know-Who's inner circle had useful information. Maybe it's because I'm Slytherin, but I can't imagine any reason to risk breaking into Azkaban unless there's a lot of money involved."

"How old is the Wilkes girl?"

"Oh, twelve or so, I should think."

Margarite nearly choked on her tea. "*Twelve?! That's obscene! How is that remotely legal?!*"

Eleanor shrugged diffidently. "He can officially marry her at that age and thereby gain legal authority over her affairs and whatever is left of the Wilkes estate, which is what I assume he's after." Then, she noticed Margarite's horrified expression. "Oh don't be so squeamish, dear. Arranged marriages, even with startling age differences, have a storied history in the wizarding world. We live for so long that age gaps of twenty or thirty years used to be perfectly normal before all the Mudbloods started whinging about civil rights for minors and other nonsense. So long as he waits until the girl is older to consummate the marriage,

assuming he even wants to, I see nothing wrong with Tiberius Nott taking a young girl under his sheltering wing."

Margarita said nothing. Given what she knew of Tiberius "*I swear I was under the Imperius*" Nott, she thought there were all sorts of things wrong with him sheltering a young girl under his wing. She resolved to look into the proposed Nott-Wilkes nuptials to see if there might be a story to be made out of that sordid affair, one that was both profitable to pursue and not likely to result in her tragic and unlamented demise. Death Eaters got so touchy when one questioned their moral character, after all. For the same reason, she ignored Eleanor Burke's overt bigotry. To be honest, whether she was Rita Skeeter or Margarite Scarabee, she sometimes felt that she preferred to deal with blood purists and other bigots. There was much less chance of her actually developing feelings of friendship with her contacts that might complicate things.

"Dumbledore shut Nott down at one point, as I recall," she said. "Some comment about how we shouldn't judge someone by their relatives that really struck home."

Eleanor nodded sagely. "Nott's father was a Grindelwald supporter. He had enough money and influence to cover it up, but it was an open secret back in the 40's. If the elder Nott had been anything less than Lord of an Ancient and Noble House, he'd have died in Azkaban. But then, the Notts have always been notoriously vile going back generations. They were very into Muggle-hunting back when it was legal. If the little No-Name boy had any sense, he'd have left the country already and counted himself lucky to be free of that shabby lot."

Rita absorbed that. She'd also wondered if there was a story to be had in the tale of Theo No-Name. And if so, was the boy a hero, a victim, or a villain? "*Best hold off on that,*" she thought to herself, "*until I find out exactly how that Ultimate Sanction nonsense affects the majority of my readers.*"

"Okay, that's enough about the Notts," she said. "What can you tell me about Fudge's new Undersecretary?"

"Not much beyond her job description and portfolio. She's Fudge's new advisor on matters pertaining to the Ministry's magical treaty obligations in general and on Hogwarts in particular. Apparently, Cornelius's admiration for Dumbles has begun to cool lately. But I don't know much about the woman in particular, which I find personally vexing, but it appears to be because she's spent the last fifteen years floundering in obscurity rather than actual discretion on her part. If you want me to, I'll make inquiries. Naturally, gossip and innuendo cost extra."

"Of course," the reporter said as she pulled a small bag of galleons from her robe and handed it over to her informant. "I think I'm familiar with your rates by now."

# Reactions & Overreactions p3

## CHAPTER 10: Reactions and Overreactions pt 3.

**5 August 1993**

***From the front page of the Daily Prophet***

### **DEMENTORS UNLEASHED!**

**FUDGE UNVEILS CONTROVERSIAL NEW PLAN!  
WILL USE DEMENTORS TO GUARD HOGWARTS AGAINST  
DEATH EATER MENACE!**

***by Rita Skeeter***

*As astute readers of the Prophet assuredly know, yesterday saw the Wizengamot in Emergency Session for the first since the fall of You-Know-Who, and what an historic day it was. After the morning session's Roll Call and Unity Vows, followed by the Chief Auror's report, deliberations resumed in the afternoon with Minister Cornelius Fudge's controversial proposal to reinstitute the so-called Death Eater Laws, a proposal that was soundly defeated by the Wizengamot. Instead, the peerage, consistent with their prior rulings in times of civil unrest, invoked the Praetor Maximus Clause of the Wizengamot Charter, a rarely-used clause which grants the Minister of Magic unfettered authority to deal with this specific crisis so long as his actions and commands do not violate any rights enumerated under the ICW Charter of Wizarding Rights, do not contravene any rights guaranteed to the peerage under the Wizengamot Charter, and do not extend to any matters unrelated to the Azkaban Crisis. The motion for Praetor Maximus was made by Peter Pettigrew on behalf of House Potter and seconded by Elphias Doge on behalf of House*



*Doge. The vote passed by a close margin of 125 to 123 with seven abstentions.*

*Having effectively placed the burden of addressing the Azkaban Crisis solely on Minister Fudge's shoulders, the Emergency Session was brought to a close soon after. But it was not until the Minister stepped out into the Atrium to address reporters that the true fireworks started. For it was there that the Minister announced that his first act under Praetor Maximus was to **summon a contingent of Dementors from Azkaban itself** to pursue, recapture, and Kiss the escapees! Even more shockingly, the Minister stated that the bulk of this cohort would be stationed at Hogwarts to help defend it against any Death Eater attacks. Minister Fudge's announcement sent a frisson of terror through those in attendance, but it soon became clear that such a course of action was completely within his extraordinary Praetor Maximus powers. This reporter hopes that our Minister knows what he's doing, for while he now holds unprecedented executive power, it is not an authority that Dementors are any more likely to respect than the Death Eaters they now pursue.*

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**4 August 1993**

***Ten minutes after the conclusion of the Minister's press conference.***

Cornelius Fudge entered his office and deposited his bowler hat and overcoat onto a hatstand before taking his seat. Then, he pulled open a drawer and removed a flask from which he took a quick shot of firewhiskey to fortify his nerves. There was a knock at the door.

"Enter," he said wearily as he put the flask away. Dolores Umbridge came in bearing a worried expression. She too

had changed out of her plum Wizengamot robes and into one of the reserved and sensible tweed outfits he'd come to associate with her.

"Bones and Potter are on their way here. Neither of them look happy."

"I hardly expected them to, Dolores. James has two sons and a wife at Hogwarts while Amelia has her niece and ward there. And honestly, I imagine I rather blindsided James with my announcement. I told him nothing about Dementors when I asked him to have his man make the motion for Praetor Maximus."

The Undersecretary nodded and then hesitated before speaking. "Minister, you hired me as Undersecretary to advise you about the details of the Ministry's treaty obligations. Are you ... open to advice in other areas?"

He studied the woman for a moment. "Yes, if offered in good faith, I suppose."

She took a deep breath. "Then ... be honest with them. Swear them to secrecy if you must - and I understand why you feel you might need to - but you *need* them to be publicly on your side in this matter. If they both have family at Hogwarts, they will never support you in this if they don't know the true reasons for your decision. And even your emergency powers can't protect you from a no confidence vote if led by the two most influential members of your own administration."

Fudge made a sour expression but then nodded in agreement. Seconds later, there was another knock on the door. Fudge's secretary came in to announce that Potter and Bones had arrived, but the two angry officials brushed past her into the office.

"Dementors?! At Hogwarts?!" James spluttered. "Have you gone mad, Cornelius?!"

"I'd like an explanation as well, Minister," said Amelia Bones just as angrily. "This seems incredibly reckless!"

The Minister dismissed his receptionist, activating the room's privacy charms as soon as she'd closed the door. "All of you have a seat. Dolores, please stay. I may need your input to answer any specific questions they may have."

With varying degrees of reluctance, the three sat down across the desk from Fudge, who took a deep breath before he began.

"None of this leaves this room. I have too much respect for you both to insist on a vow of secrecy, but if anything I'm about to say makes it into the Prophet, I promise I will do my very best to end your political careers. The official story is that we are making use of Dementors because their innate magical senses can allow them to detect the magical auras of the escapees at some distance, which makes them uniquely qualified to act as hunters. That story has the benefit of being true as far as it goes. We are also stationing Dementors around Hogwarts – not on the grounds, mind you, but at the periphery of the wards and over the Forbidden Forest – in order to demonstrate our commitment to protecting the next generation of wizards and witches from the Death Eater threat."

He paused and took an even deeper breath before continuing. "All of that is ... a diversion from the real truth: *We don't actually have any choice in the matter.* Under the Treaty of Azkaban, the Dementors *have the right* to pursue the escapees. I was able to work out an agreement with, well, the one that seems to be their leader

if they even have such a thing. I persuaded them that the escapees could be recovered more quickly and efficiently if they did as we asked by placing small groups of Dementors under the authority of aurors assigned to the national search but with the bulk of the Dementors confined to Hogwarts. I also managed to convince them that the escapees were likely to target Hogwarts because Jim Potter was there. Nonsense, I know, but they bought it and have agreed to station most of their number over the Forbidden Forest where they can't hurt anyone. Or at least agreed to do so until the end of the school year, so we're a bit pressed for time."

James started to interrupt, but Fudge held up his hand. "But make no mistake, James. If we sought to forbid the Dementors from pursuing the escapees, we would be in breach of the Treaty of Azkaban. And if that happens, *all* of the Dementors will be free to leave Azkaban *en masse* and hunt whoever and wherever they will. And I cannot risk that, no matter what the cost."

Dolores Umbridge stepped in. "By doing it this way, only a fraction of the Dementors will leave Azkaban for Britain, and most of those will remain stationary over the Forbidden Forest next to Hogwarts. The school has the largest concentration of wizards in Britain who know the Patronus Charm. Most of the faculty members and several of the students do."

"That was the real reason I wanted the Death Eater Laws reinstated – I would have had the authority to conscript every wizard and witch in Britain who can summon a Patronus in the event of a Dementor invasion. Anyway, I discussed stationing the Dementors at Hogwarts with Albus during the afternoon break," Fudge said. "He has agreed to

make the Patronus Charm part of the curriculum for all seven years of DADA."

"Albus agrees with you on this?" Amelia asked in shock.

"Grudgingly, yes, but after we showed him the relevant treaty provisions, he did reluctantly agree that this might be the safest solution until the crisis is resolved."

"Still, the Patronus is a very difficult Charm," James said. "How many students do you think can possibly learn it fast enough for it to matter?"

"Apparently, a Second Year mastered it this past spring," said Umbridge, "and so the Headmaster is reevaluating his views on its teachability."

"Uh-huh," he replied sarcastically. "And have *you* mastered it?"

"Yes, actually," she replied before pulling out her wand and summoning a silver cat patronus. "I learned it just in time for my DADA NEWT."

James actually did a double-take. "*You* have a DADA NEWT?!" he said in surprise.

"As a matter of fact, I do, Chief Auror," Umbridge replied somewhat frostily. "It was only a low Acceptable, so not enough for the lofty heights of the Auror Corps, but I do have one."

"We're getting a bit off-topic," Amelia said. "You said that only a limited number of Dementors were coming, with most staying at Hogwarts. How many Dementors are we talking about?"

Fudge licked his lips nervously. "About a hundred or so."

There was dead silence in the room.

"A *hundred*?" James finally said incredulously. "And that's a *fraction* of their total number? How many Dementors *are* there at Azkaban?"

Fudge simply nodded to Umbridge, who produced a clipboard containing her notes on that very subject. "After all these centuries, we still have no idea how Dementors reproduce or indeed if they truly do. It seems, in fact, that they simply ... *spring into existence* somehow. We *do* know that they cannot be killed by any means known to us, though there is speculation that a sufficiently powerful Patronus might be able to do so. Headmaster Dumbledore is likely the only one powerful enough, and he's never been put to that particular test. Anyway, the last attempt at a census was in 1972. It was inconclusive but indicated that the Azkaban population, which seems to include every known Dementor in the world, exceeds 1,000. It is likely quite a bit higher today."

"Merlin," Amelia whispered.

"Oh, the good news gets even better," Fudge said bitterly. "Dolores, kindly explain the Azkaban occupancy requirements."

Umbridge coughed delicately and flipped through her notes, pausing to adjust her glasses. "Pursuant to the treaty, the Ministry is obliged to maintain a prison population within certain agreed upon limits. Relevant to this discussion, we are required to maintain a minimum number of convicts on the Maximum Security level at all times. The rules are somewhat complicated, as a prisoner who is Kissed by a Dementor is deemed by them as remaining a

prisoner so long as his or her body is still alive even if it has been removed from the prison. That is why it is against Ministry policy to euthanize former prisoners who have been Kissed and why they are instead placed in a special ward at St. Mungo's and kept alive as long as possible. The longer those soulless husks endure, the longer we have before we are required to find someone else to replace them in Maximum Security."

She paused as if to collect herself before proceeding. "As of July 31st, we are in violation of the Occupancy Clause. Previously, we maintained a cushion of two extra maximum security inmates in case any of them passed away unexpectedly, but with the escape, we are now three below the minimum occupancy. We have a year and a day to cure the violation, either by capturing at least three of the escapees and returning them to Azkaban, by arranging for at least escapees to be Kissed ... or by finding at least three other people who have been convicted of crimes worthy of being sentenced to maximum security. Or, I suppose, some combination of those three options. Otherwise, on 1 August 1994, the treaty will become null and void, and the entire Dementor population will be free to ravage Britain at will."

Potter and Bones stared at the woman with horrified expressions.

"So," said Fudge, "in light of the scope of the disaster facing us, do I have your support?"

---

***Peter Pettigrew's Apartment***  
***6:40 p.m.***

Peter stepped out of his floo and threw his coat over a chair angrily without even bothering to shake off the floo powder.

Without slowing down, he went straight away to his secret chamber where he retrieved a small silver mirror (one of several grouped together on a shelf) and held it up to the light.

"Greyback! It's Peter! Where are you?" he barked into the mirror. A few seconds later, the notorious werewolf's face appeared in the mirror's image.

"What now, Peter?" Greyback said.

"Another change of plans."

"Another one?!" he scoffed. "I think you should stop calling these things *plans*, Pettigrew. At this point, they're barely aspirational goals."

"Very funny," Peter said sarcastically. "The Minister has just announced that a rather large contingent of *Dementors* will be coming over from Azkaban to search for their missing prisoners, and some of them will be stationed around Hogsmeade and at Hogwarts itself. So Operation Damsel is a no-go for September 1st. We need to study the situation more and try again later."

Greyback shook his head. "Dementors at Hogwarts. What idiot came up with that plan?"

"The worst kind of idiot, unfortunately - one who now has near-dictatorial authority when it comes to hunting down Death Eaters."

"Right. And we're still completely sure that none of our side was behind the breakout?"

Peter snorted. "Well *I'm* not involved, and neither Malfoy nor the Selwyns have a motive I can think of. Other than us,



none of the remaining free Death Eaters are remotely competent enough to pull this off. More importantly, if Rookwood was able to do so, he'd have contacted me by now. If Bellatrix was able to, she'd have contacted Narcissa by now, and *she'd* have contacted me. And if Sirius has been speaking to someone willing to listen, I'd already have aurors kicking down my door. So I honestly don't know *who* is responsible. But I'll tell you one thing – if I can find out who does have our missing compatriots, that moves up immediately to the top of our priority list."

"Rescue?"

"Of Mr. Nemo and Miss Demeanor, certainly. Those two Lestrangle idiots? Maybe, if it's not too much trouble. But our number one goal is snipping a loose end I have tolerated for nearly twelve years. We're going to find Sirius Black, and we're going to *end* him whatever it takes!"

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### ***Longbottom Manor*** ***7:30 p.m.***

Regulus stood at the foot of the four-poster bed in a Longbottom guest room and gazed down at his brother's still body. Sirius Black looked dead to the world, and from some technical perspectives, he was. The house elves had cleaned him up and changed him from filthy prisoner's stripes into fresh pajamas, but thanks to the Draught of Living Death, Sirius still looked more like a fresh cadaver than a preternaturally deep sleeper.

At present, Augusta and Harry were downstairs discussing the day's events. Regulus had heard the preliminary reports and was horrified by them. Not even in their most dire contingency plans had he and Lucius considered the

possibility of Fudge summoning Dementors to search for the escapees. Madness! All of the Azkaban co-conspirators agreed that it was now essential to move things forward as quickly as possible. Harry's Legilimency instructor, Mr. X, would be arriving in the morning for his job interview, and if he was up to snuff, they'd start interrogating the Death Eaters over the weekend. With any luck, this whole mess would be over in a week's time.

Regulus frowned at his own sentimentality. Intellectually, he realized that it was foolish to start with Sirius now while everything else had gotten complicated. Better, surely, to keep Sirius sedated until the situation with the *actual* Death Eaters had been resolved. But Regulus had waited so long for the chance to see his brother again, to apologize for the wrongs committed against him. And who knew what the coming days might bring? Steeling himself, the metamorphmagus looked over at his reflection on a wall mirror. He closed his eyes and then shook his head violently, and the elderly Asian man known only as Kato (Gilderoy Lockhart's faithful manservant) blurred and stretched into Regulus's true visage.

Removing a small vial from inside his pocket, Regulus moved to his brother's side and carefully poured the antidote to the Draught of Living Death down Sirius's throat. Then, he sat down in a chair and waited. A few seconds later, Sirius gave a small gasp as his body emerged from magical stasis. After a few seconds more, the man's eyes fluttered upon. Slowly, painfully, Sirius Black turned his head, and as he took in the face of his long-lost and supposedly dead sibling, his eyes widened in a mix of wonder and fear.

"*R-R-Reg?*" he croaked.

"Easy, brother," Regulus said gently. "Don't overexert yourself."

*"Am ... am I dead?"*

"No," he replied as reassuringly as possible. "Merlin, no, Sirius. You're not dead and neither am I. You are safe."

*"Safe?"*

"Yes," Regulus said with a smile. "Safe."

It was, perhaps, ironic that Sirius responded to that assurance of safety by transforming into an enormous black dog that snarled and leaped at Regulus, seemingly intent on ripping out his throat. The other wizard let out a startled yelp as the beast hit him squarely on the chest, its momentum knocking Regulus and the chair both over. Then, with another blur of magic, Sirius was suddenly a man again. And a furious man at that, one who was now sitting astride Regulus's chest.

*"MY BROTHER IS DEAD, YOU LYING BASTARD!"* Sirius screamed as he rained down blows on the other man's head.

A few rooms away, Augusta and Harry paused in their conversation as the sounds of screaming and violence reached them.

"What the hell was that?" Harry asked anxiously.

Augusta produced her wand from one of her sleeves and headed for the hallway. "Oh, I imagine it's just the sound of an overcomplicated Slytherin plan blowing up in our faces. Stay here."

"Lady Augusta!" he objected while producing his own wand.

"*Stay here*, Harry! You cannot use magic without triggering the Trace and drawing the Ministry's gaze to us!" With that, she ran (with surprising speed for a woman of her years) out of the parlor and in the direction of the commotion, while Harry remained behind frustrated.

Seconds later, she reached the corridor leading to Sirius's bedroom just in time to see the man himself stagger out while holding his brother's wand. As soon as he saw her, Sirius fired off a Stunner but it went wide. Augusta took shelter behind a suit of armor and called out to her attacker.

"Sirius Black! This is Augusta Longbottom! Frank Longbottom's mother! You have nothing to fear from us! Please, let us help you!"

Unfortunately, Sirius's only response were a few more attempted stunners which only missed because he was using an unfamiliar wand.

"Right, then," Augusta said irritably as she touched the suit of armor with her wand. "**AVIFORS**." Instantly, the armor was transfigured into a flock of starlings which hurled itself at Sirius and quickly surrounded him. Desperately, he batted at the small birds but was unable to draw a bead on Augusta who quickly advanced. "**EXPELLIARMUS!**" Instantly, Sirius's stolen wand was sent flying, and he dropped to his knees, putting his hands over his head to ward off the swirling mass of birds. Augusta advanced, her wand pointed at him.

"Stay down, Mr. Black. I do not wish to stun you, but I will if you continue to resist."

Sirius seemed to do as she asked, though he did not look up from his position on the floor. With a slash of her wand, Augusta dispelled the flock of starlings which flew back past her and reformed into the suit of armor from whence it had come. But in her brief instant of distraction, Sirius tensed ... and suddenly was a grim once more. Caught by surprise, Augusta tried to stun the beast, but it moved with alarming speed, knocking her to the ground and causing her to lose her own wand. The great hound bounded past her and down the corridor. For with its keen hearing, the animal could detect the nearby crackle of flames. And in a wizarding home, where there were flames, there was likely a floo connection.

Following the sound, the grim turned straight into the parlor where Harry was waiting. The young Slytherin held his wand up but did not aim it. As Augusta had noted, any use of magic by him under these circumstances would draw an Underage Magic Use warning and possibly even more stringent Ministry attention. The grim growled menacingly and slowly moved towards him.

*"Typical,"* thought Harry ruefully. *"Moody and Jim both mentioned that Sirius Black might be an Animagus, but we didn't bother to prepare for that possibility. And of course, he's something big and scary. God forbid that his Animagus form should be a hedgehog or parakeet!"*

The dog continued its slow advance. Unable to use magic, Harry turned to his second greatest power: his knack for talking his way out of problems. Carefully, he positioned himself between the grim and the floo, while the dog crept forward, growling the whole time. Harry assumed that Sirius was sticking to his animal-form rather switching back to his human shape so as to be better able to dodge a spell. And truth be told, the dog was probably better at dodging

attacks than the man. Desperately, Harry tried to think of something to say that would deter Sirius or at least make him hesitate until help arrived. Unfortunately, he didn't actually *know* much about the man on any personal level, and so for once, his Legilimency seemed to be of no use... until, in an act of supreme concentration that surprised the boy himself, a memory popped into his head, one from so far back in his childhood that it should have been impossible for him to recall.

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### ***A long time ago...***

*The big man's face looked so different then. His hair was shiny and his beard neat, and there were no lines around the eyes that seemed to twinkle almost as much as Dumbledore's. Then, the big man let out a broad grin, and Harry could hear himself gurgling in delight.*

*"Hey there, my little lion," the big man said in a soft voice. "I'm your Uncle Sirius. Yes! Yes, I am! Course I'm not really an uncle, though you can call me that if you wish. I'm something better than an uncle. I'm your godfather! Hello!" He held up a hand and wriggled them down at the baby.*

*"That means I'll always be there for you. Always! And look what your godfather has for you on your very first birthday!"*

*The big man reached into his robe and pulled out a stuffed black dog. "This is Padfoot, Harry. Which is also my name, but you can't use that all the time. When we're alone, though, you can call me Padfoot or Uncle Sirius, whichever you like. And Little Padfoot here can stay with you and watch over you whenever I'm not around to remind you*

*about me." He placed the stuffed dog into Harry's arms, and the one-year-old embraced it tightly.*

*"Pa-foo," the infant Harry said. Sirius froze, and then his face lit up in delight.*

*"Padfoot?" he inquired.*

*"Pa-foo," the baby answered.*

*Sirius let out an excited "HEE!" before slapping his hand over his mouth and looking around the room to reassure himself that no one else was there.*

*"Okay, little lion, while that was undeniably awesome and probably my new Patronus memory, let's not do that in front of your Mum or Dad for a while. James would have an absolute cow if he learned that you'd said 'Padfoot' before 'Da-da' or 'Ma-ma.'"*

*Little Harry said nothing else except to giggle softly as he clutched the stuffed dog tighter.*

---

**Now...**

Harry blinked three times in astonishment at the thought of summoning up a perfectly clear memory of something that happened when he was one-year-old. Then, he shook it off as the grim took another step forward.

"Pa-foo," he said. "I mean, *Padfoot*. That's your other name, right, Uncle Sirius?" The dog froze instantly.

"You said I could call you either when you gave me that stuffed grim for my birthday. Do you remember that day? You told me that you were my godfather and that you'd

always be around to protect me and look after me, right? That's why I know you won't hurt me now."

The dog began to whine softly. Harry slowly inched towards it and carefully put his hand out palm-up. The whimpering grim leaned forward, sniffed at his hand, and licked it once. Then, in the blink of an eye, he was Sirius Black once more, a crying distraught Sirius Black who immediately snatched the startled boy up in a tight embrace. A few seconds later, when Augusta Longbottom came into the room with her wand drawn, it was Harry who waved her off, as the weeping man could only hold onto him for dear life while brokenly sobbing over and over again.

*"I'm sorry, Harry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."*

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### ***Five minutes later ...***

Once he realized by the boy's scent that Harry was indeed his godson, all the fight went out of Sirius Black. He allowed Harry and Augusta to escort him back to his room, and along the way, he apologized to Augusta for knocking her down. He did *not* apologize to Regulus when he met up with his younger brother in the hallway despite the mass of bruises on his face and the chipped front tooth. After taking a few potions, Regulus's injuries were soon repaired, but there were no potions or spells on hand to immediately fix the two black eyes his brother had given him. Also, his earlier desire to beg Sirius's forgiveness was strangely muted now. Finally, once back in bed, Sirius spoke to his younger sibling.

"So. You didn't die."

"Obviously not."



"It's a pretty crappy thing to do, letting your family think you're dead."

Regulus shrugged. "If I remember correctly, in our last actual conversation before this one, you reminded me that you had the legal authority to execute Death Eaters and that you wouldn't let whatever weak bonds of affection you had for me stay your hand if we crossed wands."

Sirius nodded. "And did you become a Death Eater?"

Silently, Regulus pulled up his sleeves to reveal the absence of a Dark Mark. "Grandfather wanted me to join so we'd have Blacks in both camps, but he also gave me the means to fake my own death if I changed my mind. A modified Fidelius of some kind, designed to activate when I cleaned out the emergency vault he'd left for me. Anyone who knew Regulus Black would just assume I had died somehow without thinking too much about the details unless someone who knew the truth corrected them. Of course, it's not a true Fidelius, and sufficiently clever or strong-willed people can see through it, so if you want to rat me out to the DMLE and ship me off to Azkaban, the spell won't stop you."

"Good to know. Have you done anything worthy of Azkaban, Little Brother?" Sirius asked in a low voice.

Despite himself, Harry stiffened uncomfortably. "*Do I sound like that when I call Jim 'Little Brother'? That ... hateful?*"

"Lord Black," Augusta interrupted. "I know you must be under a great strain at the moment, but let me reassure you. Your brother and his allies rescued you from Azkaban despite enormous risks. Whatever issues remain between you and Regulus, I would ask you to set them aside for the moment, for the stakes are higher than you could possibly know."

Sirius appeared to tune out everything except her first words. "*Lord ... Black?*"

"Grandfather died in 1991," Reg said almost blandly. "You've been Lord Black ever since, despite your incarceration."

"Uh-huh," Sirius said dully while absorbing that information. "Okay, I'll ... process that later, I guess. So where's James in all this? I saw him at Azkaban. Wasn't he part of the rescue?"

"That was me, Sirius," Regulus said. "I took James Potter's form. I'm a metamorphmagus."

Sirius barked out a laugh. "Since when?"

"Since my seventh birthday, when my hair grew back overnight after some imbecile lopped it all off as a cruel joke."

"WHAT?!" Harry suddenly exclaimed. Everyone turned to look at him in surprise.

"Pfff," sneered Sirius. "It wasn't *that* mean of a joke." Regulus gave him a foul look while Harry just shook his head.

"No, no. It's just ..." he muttered before turning to Regulus. "We've got too much else to talk about now, but later on, I'd like to hear that story. For ... reasons."

Regulus stared at the boy before finally shrugging. "I'll make a note of it."

"So let me get this straight. You've been a metamorphmagus since you were *seven* and concealed it

from me this whole time?!" Sirius said in disbelief. Regulus pursed his lips in annoyance. Then, he closed his eyes and concentrated. With soft pop of magic, he suddenly looked like James Potter once more. Sirius's eyes widened in shock.

"And speaking of James Potter," Regulus said, "you will be disappointed to learn that not only was your old partner-in-crime not involved in your liberation, he is still firmly convinced that you are a Death Eater and a spy, as well as the person who betrayed his family to the Dark Lord."

Sirius leaned back against his pillow and shut his eyes tight. "Damn you, Wormtail."

Harry's jaw dropped in surprise at the mention of one of the four Marauders who created his enchanted map, specifically one who by process of elimination was perhaps the last person he'd expect to have betrayed the Potters. Meanwhile, Regulus shook his head violently and reverted to his true form.

"You used that name back at Azkaban. You said that was who really betrayed the Potters. Who is *Wormtail*?"

Without opening his eyes, Sirius hissed out a name. "Peter Pettigrew."

There was dead silence for a few seconds before Harry, despite himself, barked out a laugh. "Peter Pettigrew is a *Death Eater*? James Potter's Seneschal, proxy, and personal solicitor? Jim's godfather? He's just been hiding in plain sight for ever a decade? That's ... incredible!"

"Jim?" Sirius inquired.

"My twin brother. You do remember Lily having twins right?"

Sirius rubbed his face for several seconds. "Yeah, yeah, I think so. I mean, I just never had much to do with him. He was Peter's godson, not mine. I guess I don't have any memories of him that survived..." Then, he shuddered and began to hyperventilate. Augusta rushed forward and unstopped another Calming Draught for him. "Sorry," he said quietly after his anxiety attack had passed.

"It's quite alright, Lord Black," Augusta said. "Perhaps we could move on to memories that are less triggering. What do you remember about your trial? Do you know how you were forced to issue your false confession?"

Sirius stared at her dully. "I never had a trial. I never confessed to anything."

The others looked at one another in confusion. "The trial transcript is still sealed, I think," said Harry. "But it's supposed to run more than fifty pages, most of it you testifying in detail and under Veritaserum about all the innocent people you Imperiused into taking the Dark Mark against their will."

"I. Never. Had. A. Trial." he growled. "I spent about two days in the DMLE lockup begging for a chance to tell my story to someone. Then, an auror came in and stunned me. Next thing I know, I'm in my cell in Azkaban."

Harry sat back in his chair with a thoughtful expression. "So, question one. How did Voldemort loyalists fake a whole trial that was overseen by a respected three-judge panel without the involvement of the defendant?"

"And question two," Regulus added. "How did someone convince James and Lily Potter that Sirius was the Secret Keeper instead of Pettigrew? It can't just be a memory spell. Potter is an auror and, I assume, must have handled a

Remembrall in open court as part of every single criminal trial at which he's testified over the last twelve years."

"And question *three*," Sirius said rather archly. "How did Harry get involved in this if James doesn't know the truth? Why are you even here at Longbottom Manor this time of night?"

"Well," Harry said with some embarrassment, "I *live* here, during the summers at least. There's some ... legal issues between James and I that stop me from living with the Potters."

"James? The Potters? Do these *legal issues* explain why you talk about your family like you're not even related to them?"

"Yes," Harry replied tersely and without elaborating.

"Harry..." Sirius began, but Regulus interrupted.

"Harry's upbringing is not even in the top ten of our to-do list, Sirius. Let's cut to the chase. The Dark Lord's body was destroyed in 1981, but his spirit lingers on, bound to this plane by cursed magical items called ..."

"Horcruxes," Sirius finished. The other three stared at him in shock.

"How the hell did you know that?" Regulus asked.

Sirius gave a throaty chuckle. "Grandfather Arcturus made me study the Codex just like I reckon he did with you after I left the family. Also, Bellatrix spent a lot of time ranting about how the Dark Lord would someday be restored to his former glory. And occasionally singing peppy tunes about the subject. She gave me enough information to guess what he'd done."

Harry looked over to Reg. "Well, I guess we know who has one of them, at least."

Sirius continued. "I could never tell anyone because of Arcturus's oaths... But I can now, which means you three already know about the Codex. Which, in turn, raises the question: *WHY THE HELL IS MY GODSON MUCKING ABOUT WITH THE ANATHEMA CODEX!*"

After Sirius finished bellowing, he fell back onto his pillow, coughing and wheezing. Augusta muttered a soft expletive and fed him another potion.

"Lord Black, you must control your emotions. You're still very weak from your time in Azkaban and must not overexert yourself!"

"Fine, fine. But for pity's sake, call me Sirius. Lord Black was my grandfather, and I'm not sure I want to follow in his footsteps."

"Well, I'm afraid you'll have to, at least for tonight," Regulus said. "The *reason* I fled the Death Eaters and faked my own death in the process was that I learned that he'd made a horcrux out of Salazar Slytherin's locket, and I stole it away from him. We've since learned that he made more than one, but the one I recovered has been hidden at Grimmauld Place this whole time. We need you to summon Kreacher and have him bring the locket here."

"Oh no, we most certainly need not!" Augusta interrupted testily. "You will *not* summon into this house Walburga Black's house elf that has been trapped in 12 Grimmauld Place for more than a decade with naught by the horcrux of He Who Must Not Be Named for company! Who *knows* how deranged that poor elf might be by now. And who knows

what powers that locket might bring to bear once it's brought here."

"But Lady Augusta, we *must* destroy the locket," Regulus said.

"And so you shall, but there's no reason to compromise the wards of Longbottom Manor to do it." She turned to Sirius and fixed him with a somewhat motherly gaze. "Lord, er, Sirius? If you will but say '*I, Sirius Black, Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of Black, do hereby grant admittance to 12 Grimmauld Place to my brother Regulus and his allies,*' that will be sufficient to let Regulus go himself and destroy the locket-horcrux there."

Sirius coughed and then did as Augusta asked.

"Right then," Regulus said. "I'll be off." He turned and strode out of the room without another glance towards Sirius. Harry glanced around at the grown-ups in the room before rising himself.

"Um, excuse me," he said before following Regulus out, ignoring his god-father's calls as he left.

"Regulus! Wait up. You might need me with you."

Regulus stopped and whirled on the boy in surprise and a bit of annoyance. "*Mr. Potter,*" he said, slipping briefly back into his Lockhart persona, "I am a dueling champion, a ex-Death Eater, a former auror, and the best DADA instructor Hogwarts has had in years. What on earth makes you think I might *need* a thirteen-year-old boy to help me in the relatively simple task of retrieving and destroying an item from my own home?"

"Well, as it happens, after you told Mr. Malfoy and me about Slytherin's locket, I looked it up and noticed that the big S-insignia on the front looks like a snake. And since it *is* Slytherin's locket, I'd bet good money that a Parselmouth can talk to it and maybe learn about the other horcruxes we don't know about yet."

Regulus opened his mouth to chastise the boy for the silliness of his suggestion, but then, he paused when he realized the suggestion was, in fact, quite sound. Finally, after a few seconds, he reluctantly acquiesced.

"I have three rules, Mr. Potter. One: Once we're in Grimmauld Place, touch nothing except at my direction! Two: If I tell you to do something, you do it instantly and without stopping to ask any stupid questions. And three..." He paused for a moment. "Well, I guess I'll just think up the third rule when we get there. Come along."

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## **12 Grimmauld Place**

### **Islington, London**

### **9 p.m.**

About twenty minutes later, Harry and Regulus stood on a lonely street in Islington before a row of town houses that seemed to have once been quite elegant but had since fallen on hard times. From the look of things, most of them were fairly shoddy apartments now. Regulus looked around to make sure they were unobserved. Then, he produced his wand and slashed it in the direction of the houses marked 11 and 13 while whispering "*Toujour Pur.*" For a second, Harry thought it odd that there was no Number 12, but then, the other houses slid apart and the missing town house came into view as if it had somehow been squashed



between the other two. He looked up at the older wizard in amazement.

"The house is Unplottable, which means it cannot be physically perceived by those not keyed into it, as you and I now are." With that explanation, Regulus started towards their now visible destination with Harry following behind, reshouldering the book bag he carried as he went.

"Why did the Blacks buy a house in a Muggle neighborhood?" he asked. "Weren't your lot all...?"

"Violent bigots?" Regulus replied. "There are some things that trump Pureblood disdain for Muggles. One of my ancestors discovered an untapped ley line convergence in this neighborhood back in the 1800's. At the time, Number 12 was just thought by Muggles to be a haunted house, but it was because the ghosts of the Muggles who had died there were being supported by the magic from those ley lines."

"And what are ley lines again?" Harry inquired.

"A good question, and one wizards have been debating for centuries. All we know definitively is that are these invisible, intangible, and largely theoretical lines that criss-cross the whole planet. We can't actually detect the lines themselves, but the places where they connect are magically reactive. That is, if you perform magic where these lines intersect, it's possible to do high level magic more easily than in other locations and also to work spells whose results will last indefinitely. Hogwarts is located at the junction of a large number of ley lines, as is the Ministry of Magic and Diagon Alley, which is why all of those were chosen as locations for those structures. In fact, the British Isles possess an unusual number of such junctions and an extremely unusual

number of junctions in which more than two ley lines intersect. That's why our ancestors came here from Rome in the first place. It's also why Magical Britain has influence over the rest of the magical world that's somewhat out of proportion to our population and the relative military and economic strength of the Muggle nation within which we reside. When push comes to shove, we can generate more raw magical power than all but a few of the other wizarding nations"

He continued talking as he paused to disable the remaining wards on the house before casting an Alohomora on the door. "Number 12 Grimmauld Place sits at the intersection of two ley lines that had somehow gone undetected for centuries. My great-great-grandfather found the place, acquired the house from the Muggles who lived here, and diverted the magical energies of the intersecting ley lines into defensive spells and spatial expansion."

"So the place is even bigger on the inside?" Harry asked looking up to the top of the three story building before following Regulus inside.

"Yes. About thirty or so rooms, I should think, including an orangery on the top floor if Mother never got rid of it. Father was the one who always had to have a fresh orange for breakfast. Oh, and watch out for the troll's leg."

"The wha-OOOF!" Harry said as he tripped and fell over what appeared to be the calf and foot of a troll which had been stuffed and used as an umbrella stand.

"Sorry. Should have remembered. The stand is cursed. Anyone who is descended from House Black but who is not at least three generations Pureblood will be confunded to

bang their shin on it if they get too near. Mother's way of establishing dominance, I suppose."

"Charming," Harry said sarcastically. He turned to look down the gloomy hall as Regulus summoned a Lumos. Harry still couldn't use his own wand, and he was annoyed that he hadn't thought to bring a torch. Still, even a single Lumos was enough to reveal how dusty and filthy the house was. Suddenly, both of them jumped in fright at the sound of a hysterical voice shrieking in the gloom.

"WHO IS THERE?! IS SOMEONE THERE?! WHO DARES INTRUDE UPON THE SACRED HAVEN OF THE ANCIENT AND NOBLE HOUSE OF BLACK! WHO! WHO!"

For a few seconds, Regulus went as white as a sheet. But then, he realized that the screaming was coming from a nearby wall-hanging covered by heavy velvet curtains. Steeling himself, Regulus walked over and pulled back the musty curtains to reveal a beautiful oil painting depicting heavyset older woman sitting on an overstuffed chair. She wore elegant clothes and expensive-looking jewelry, but her hair was disheveled and her eyes looked wild. And when she got a look at Regulus, they got even wilder.

"Hello, Mother," he said quietly.

"*Regulus*," she whispered. "You live? How is this possible?!"

"Grandfather arranged it for me," he replied. "He foresaw the possibility that the Dark Lord might be a monster and that a time might come when I would need to flee him for my own safety."

"But ... why didn't you tell us?" she asked in shock.

"Well to be honest, Mother, I suspected that if you knew I was alive, you would give the information to the Death Eaters as a punishment for not living up to your ... *ideals*."

The woman's face darkened. "And so we *would have*! You who turned your back on the Dark Lord! And on the Ancient and Noble House of Black! I see now you're no better than your miserable brother Sirius!"

"Thank you, Mother," he said calmly. "That's perhaps the best compliment you've ever paid me."

Then, he gestured with his wand, and the curtains fell back across Walburga's painting, muffling her words but not silencing them. It sounded to Harry as if the woman had begun weeping and wailing behind her curtain. Regulus turned away from the curtains with a stony expression, and Harry followed him further into the house, carefully picking his way past dusty furniture and old cobwebs. Regulus led the boy into a sitting room and cast his Lumos spell again, but instead of lighting his wand, the spell caused various oil lamps and an overhead chandelier to light themselves. Though visibility improved, the additional light somehow only made the decrepit home even more gloomy and sinister.

"So if you don't mind me asking, exactly what *is* your relationship with Sirius? I mean, beyond the mere fact that you're brothers. You went to great lengths to rescue him and you just defended him in front of your mother's portrait, but when you're actually with him, you two are at each other's throats."

Regulus sighed. "Honestly, I don't even know myself. I've waited years for the chance to confront Sirius, to admit that

he was right and I was wrong, and to beg his forgiveness for my transgressions."

"But?"

"But when I'm actually talking to him, all of the sudden, it all comes back. The hostility we had for each other all through school. His arrogance. His self-righteousness. His vindictiveness. All of it." Regulus rubbed his forehead and then winced from the bruising on his eyes. "Him kicking my arse back at the Manor didn't help, I suppose. Still, there was a reason back at Hogwarts that I made it a project to get you and your brother on better terms. Though I was unsuccessful there, I hope you will take the lessons of Sirius and myself to heart."

"I have. And Jim and I are getting along much better. To be honest, James is the only one I have problem with at the moment, and that's mainly because I still don't understand why he was so hostile before so I don't know how to prevent it happening again."

"So you're no longer seeking revenge against them for abandoning you?"

Harry made a wistful face. "Well, I certainly haven't *forgotten* about it, but with everything that's going on with Voldemort and the horcruxes, I just don't feel that I have enough hours in the day for a cruel Slytherinesque revenge. So I'm putting it on the back-burner. We'll see how long that lasts."

"Mm-hmm," Regulus nodded. "By the by, why were you so interested in Sirius lopping off my hair when we were kids?"

Harry hesitated. "When I was seven, my Aunt Petunia got mad because she couldn't do anything with my hair ... so she got some clippers and shaved me down to the scalp. I cried all night because I thought I'd have to go to school nearly bald, but the next day, my hair was right back the way it was. That scared her enough for her to never mess with my hair again."

"Interesting. And you're wondering if you have the potential to be a metamorphmagus?" Harry nodded. "Well, your Great-Aunt Cassiopeia had it, so it definitely runs in your bloodline. If you're interested, we can explore that possibility next summer."

"Next summer? Why not now?"

Regulus laughed. "Because you're about to go back to Hogwarts. Shapeshifting takes years to master. If you start training now, there's a risk you might get stuck in a partial transformation for days or even weeks. When I was eight, I once spent four whole days with purple hair, blue skin, and cat-eyes before I could change myself back to normal. And if you get caught as a Metamorphmagus while at Hogwarts, you're on the Conscription List for sure."

"Good point," said Harry as he resigned himself to waiting a year to explore this possible gift.

"Also, spend some time talking to Sirius now that we know he's an Animagus. As your godfather, he may offer to teach you that gift instead. Being an Animagus and a Metamorphmagus are mutually exclusive. It is impossible for a single person to develop both gifts."

Harry nodded. At the moment, he was far more interested in metamorphmagic, in part because he suspected Jim was studying animagic and he had little interest in following in

his brother's footsteps. Still, it wouldn't hurt to ask Sirius a few questions.

"So where's your house elf?" he asked, changing the subject.

Regulus turned pensive. "I don't know. I'd have thought he'd have shown up by now since we're the first people to come into this house since Mother died." He cleared his throat. "Kreacher!"

There was a loud, angry pop that startled them both, and suddenly there was an aged and decrepit elf standing before them. For a second, he looked up at Regulus with wonder and joy, but then his eyes narrowed.

"Master Regulus ... lives?" he said slowly.

"Yes, Kreacher," Regulus said as he studied his former elf with a sad expression.

"Kreacher grieved for Master Regulus," the elf said in a rasping tone. "Kreacher *wept* for Master Regulus."

"Kreacher, I'm ... truly sorry to have caused you pain, and I promise I'll make it up to you. But, well, I'm a bit pressed for time, I'm afraid. Could you please bring me the locket that I entrusted to you all those years ago?"

Kreacher stared at Regulus with a disturbingly vengeful expression before popping away.

"He doesn't seem to like you very much," Harry said nervously.

"No, he's obviously more upset than I'd realized because of my deception," Regulus said somewhat guiltily. "He basically

raised me, you know."

"Did he?" Harry replied without taking his eyes off the spot Kreacher had just departed. "Well, I'm sure he was a splendid caregiver."

Seconds later, Kreacher returned with the locket in his hands. With exaggerated care, he placed the locket on the floor in front of the two wizards. Then, he sat back on his haunches and looked up at Regulus with an intense gleam in his eye. Harry and Regulus looked back and forth between Kreacher, the locket, and each other.

"Thank you, Kreacher, for your ... devoted service," Regulus finally said. "You can, um, return to your other duties now." Kreacher did not move. Then, Regulus looked around the room and ran his fingers across a nearby credenza that was caked in dust. He rubbed his fingers together to get rid of the grime while looking expectantly at the house elf. Finally, with a low grumble, Kreacher popped away.

"Oh, yeah," Harry said. "A right Mary Poppins, that one."

"Quiet, you. Let's just get this over with."

Harry nodded and carefully moved around the locket so that it was between the two of them. He leaned over to study the snake insignia, took a breath, and then hissed at it.

*"Hello? Can you sssspeak with me?"*

The locket twitched slightly, and then the S-shaped serpent insignia on the cover slid around in a figure-eight pattern before finally coiling in the center. Then, the tiny snake's head lifted itself up and addressed Harry directly.



*"Ssspeaker. What isss thy name?"* Regulus suppressed a shudder. Despite the snake's tiny size, its unearthly hissing seemed to echo through the darkened house.

*"Harry,"* the boy hissed in reply. *"And what should I call you?"*

*"Great Sssalazar Ssslytherin never sssaw fit to name me. Call me ... Locket."*

*"Very well, Locket. What can you tell me of the one who possssssessed you lassst."*

The tiny snake hissed angrily which, ironically under the circumstances, Harry thought was a good sign.

*"Powerful isss that one, Little Sssspeaker. Ssssteeped in the darkest artssss. Even though he issss far away, he leachesss Locket's power for hissss own."*

*"What can you tell me of other objectsss like yourssself that he hasss corrupted?"*

The locket-snake hissed painfully. *"Arggh. That part of the Dark One inssside me awakenssss. It growsss angry at Locket'sss indisscretion. Quickly! Locket only knowsss of one other sssuch vesssel. Yearsss ago, Locket passed from thossse of the blood to one not of the blood. A vacuoussss cow of the line of Hufflepuff. The Dark One took her family'sss greatessst treasssure when he claimed thisss one. Now, Locket begsss you. Sssstrike down the perversssion and end Locket'sss ssssuffering!"*

With one last angry hiss, the snake sank down into the face of the locket which now seem pulse with an unnatural power. Harry looked up at Regulus and nodded. From his book bag, the boy pulled out two pairs of dragonhide gloves

and handed one pair over to Regulus before donning the other himself. Next, he pulled a small wooden box out of the bag. Inside were two glistening basilisk fangs which he carefully extracted, again passing one to Regulus who took it with exquisite care before kneeling a few feet from the horcrux.

"You tell it to open, Harry, and I'll strike first. Stand well back and do nothing unless ... well, unless the bloody thing kills me or something. Then, I suppose you're on your own."

Harry nodded and then hissed at the locket. "*Open.*"

There was a soft click and the locket opened. Regulus moved to strike, but before he could, a shockwave of magical force exploded out of the locket knocking both of them to the ground and causing Harry to drop his basilisk fang. Then, an impenetrable black mist erupted from the locket all the way up to the ceiling, accompanied by a hideous ***SKREETCH*** that seemed to echo in both their minds despite their respective skills at Occlumency. Harry desperately looked around for his dropped fang while trying to buttress his mental defenses, but despite himself, he glanced up at the mist and saw that some large figure seemed to be moving within it. The mist parted and Harry was left paralyzed with horror.

Looming over him was the shambling, rotted corpse of Vernon Dursley.

"*YOU DID THIS TO ME, FREAK!*" the maggot-infested figure screamed at him. "*LOOK AT ME! YOU'VE KILLED ME! JUST LIKE YOU ALWAYS WANTED!*"

"No!" Harry gasped out in terror and guilt. "It wasn't my fault!"

The Vernon-thing didn't answer. It simply issued a bellow of rage and reached for Harry with a clawed hand, and as it did, the creature's entire body dissolved into a storm of doxies that fell on top of the boy who screamed in fear and pain.

"Harry!" Regulus cried out. Then, he focused down on the locket responsible for the nightmare before him. He hefted the basilisk fang and was ready to strike when the black mist twisted and billowed against. And from within it came a second figure. Regulus was prepared mentally for the sight of Eustace Tully looming over him and baying for revenge, but it was no werewolf who stepped out of the mist.

*"Hello, pretty boy,"* said Matilda White with a smile for her husband.

"You ... no ... not real!" Regulus gasped in shock as he tried to fight against every one of his senses that were now leading him astray.

*"What does 'real' mean in a world of magic, luv,"* she said as she reached down to gently graze his cheek with her hand. *"Aren't I real enough to touch?"*

From somewhere far away, Regulus could hear the sound of someone screaming in agony, but he found he couldn't take his eyes off the image of his wife standing before him, alive once more.

"This isn't ... you're ... oh ... oh Matty, I've missed you so much!" A single tear rolled down the man's cheek.

*"Shh, it's okay, my luv. We're together now. That's all that matters."* She smiled again. *"And not just us. He's waiting for you too."*

"Who?" Regulus whispered. And from somewhere nearby, he could hear the sound of a baby's soft gurgle.

Nearby, Harry was on the ground in a fetal position as scores of doxies crawled all over him, stinging him through his clothes and even through his dragonhide gloves. His vision was growing blurry, but he could see Regulus standing nearby, ignoring him as he was transfixed by the image of his late wife. Nearby, Kreacher had returned. He stood at the entrance to the sitting room, watching the scene with quiet amusement. Gritting his teeth through the pain - "*Not real! Not real!*" he thought desperately - Harry rolled over and tried to pull himself forward with his hands even as the poisonous stings continued.

"*Our beautiful Leo is on the other side.*" Not-Matilda said. "*He wants his daddy, Rusty. We both want you to join us. So we can be a family again.*"

"How?" the man asked in a daze as tears now streamed down his cheeks.

The false-Matilda moved to embrace Regulus warmly, and she whispered gently in his ear. "*The answer's right there in your hands, pretty boy. One single prick of your skin. And then we can all be together once more. Forever.*"

Nearby, a quivering hand in a blood-stained dragonhide glove slowly closed around a long sharp pearly-white object.

Not-Matty smiled down at Regulus, and it felt so good to see her pretty blue eyes once more. It had been so long. Regulus grinned joyfully back at the love of his life, barely aware of how his hand rose of its own accord, bringing the basilisk fang ever closer to his throat.

**"GAAAAHH!"** Harry screamed through the pain as he brought his own basilisk fang down right into the heart of Slytherin's Locket. The false-Matty screamed and then vanished, as did the doxy swarm and the black mist that had created them both. Harry collapsed onto the floor. The agonizing pain was gone, but the memory of it still lingered, like a nightmare from which he couldn't quite wake up.

Regulus looked around wildly for a few seconds after the specter disappeared. Then, he noticed the basilisk fang he was still holding just a few inches from his neck. With a loud cry, he hurled it away down the hall before rushing to check his companion.

"Harry! Harry! Are you alright? Speak to me!"

He rolled Harry over, and the boy's eyes fluttered open. He looked up to regard Regulus with a bleary expression.

"M ... M'sorry," he said with a slurred voice.

"Sorry? /sniff/ My dear boy, what could you possibly have to feel sorry about?" Regulus asked as he wiped his face, relieved that Harry seemed to be recovering.

"M' sorry about your wife. She was very beautiful."

Regulus smiled and nodded. "Yes Yes, she was. And for what it's worth, I'm sorry your uncle was a grotesque flatulent git."

Despite his pain (and the guilt he still felt over indirectly causing Vernon's death), Harry couldn't help but laugh at Regulus's unkind remark. And with laughter, the pain from his psychic injuries lessened.

Nearby, the locket of Salazar Slytherin lay ruined on the floor, the black lies it whispered silenced forever.

# Reactions & Overreactions (4)

## CHAPTER 11: Reactions and Overreactions (Finale).

**5 August 1993**

**8:30 a.m.**

**The Office of Chief Auror James Potter**

"I want to thank you boys for bringing all this to our attention," the Chief Auror said earnestly. "At this point, every lead helps, and finding out that there's a connection between Azkaban and that business with Lockhart last term is a big one."

On the other side of James's desk sat three members of the Weasley family: Arthur, Percy, and George. Also present in the room were Senior Aurors Shacklebolt and Thicknesse and newly-commissioned Auror Proudfoot, who'd had an unexpectedly stressful first few months on the job.

"Think nothing of it, Chief Auror," Arthur said. "As soon as the boys told me last night that Professor Lockhart had put them to work on experimental portkeys and modified Polyjuice Potions, I knew we'd best let the aurors know."

For their part, Percy and George both looked contrite but also relieved that they weren't in any trouble.

"Do either of you still have any notes from your Lockhart research?" James asked. At that, Percy immediately produced a stack of parchment which he eagerly handed over.

"Here, sir. I always make a point of duplicating any reports or papers I turn in at school, especially near the end."

Sometimes, especially near the end of term, the teachers don't always return them to us."

"I, ah, don't have anything, I'm afraid," George said apologetically. "I turned everything I had over to Auror Proudfoot." A soft growl came from the man himself who was standing a few feet behind the Weasleys. George winced. "Ah, sorry. To whoever it was who was pretending to be Auror Proudfoot."

"Quite so, quite so," James said while shooting the real Proudfoot a dirty look. "Well, I think that's all I need right now, but we'll contact you if we need any more information. Again, thank you for coming to see me. Arthur, boys."

The three Weasleys departed, leaving the office to James, his senior staff, and a visibly angry Michael Proudfoot. James noticed the young man's mood.

"Michael, I know this is all very upsetting to you, but if you want to stay on this case, you need to control your emotions. Otherwise, I'll have to reassign you until this investigation is over."

Proudfoot grimaced. "Sorry sir. It won't happen again."

"So," said Kingsley, "where does that leave us?"

James sat back in his chair, acutely aware of the fact that Rufus Scrimgeour, the man he'd replaced, was a deductive genius who would be brimming with ideas at this point. James knew he was not so gifted but was determined to fight his way through somehow.

"Well, we now have a clear connection between Azkaban and the Gilderoy Lockhart affair." Then, James perked up.



"Maybe it's time we put some more effort into getting Lockhart his memories back."

"Is that possible?" asked Thicknesse. "If the spell that hit Lockhart is really the same one they use down under in place of executions, it's supposed to be permanent."

"Maybe so, but I'd rather get it from the horse's mouth. Kingsley, get an owl out to the Australian DMLE. See if they can send us somebody who's got experience with the Tabula Rasa Charm and can confirm that it's what took Lockhart's memories. And maybe they can give us some ideas about who could have learned that Charm without swearing an oath against using it illegally."

"On it," Kingsley said as he made a note on his pad.

"Now then, Auror Proudfoot, let's get back to your interactions with this 'Maria Gambrelli' person who you think is the one that stole some of your hair for Polyjuice."

Auror Proudfoot blanched. It was not a conversation to which he'd been looking forward.

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**9:30 a.m.**

***Harry's Room, Longbottom Manor***

Harry's eyes fluttered open, and then he winced sharply in pain. The boy had mostly recovered from the psychic attack he had suffered from the locket-horcrux the night before, but even the next morning, he still suffered from a splitting headache and heavy nausea. After returning from Grimmauld Place with Regulus, he'd gone straight to bed (in part to avoid questions from Sirius), and he was surprised to note from the clock on his night stand that he'd slept until 9:30. It was perhaps the latest he'd overslept for

years, and for a moment, he imagined his Uncle Vernon bellowing at him for his laziness and sloth. Then, he remembered the vision of his uncle that the horcrux had shown him the night before and shuddered.

Shaking off the bad memories (if not the physical symptoms), Harry staggered to his bathroom to relieve himself and splash some water on his face before returning to his bedroom. There, to his surprise, he saw that his bed had already been made and the dirty clothes he'd simply dropped on the floor the night before had been removed. In their place, to Harry's greater surprise, was Dobby. The elf's dingy Malfoy tunic had been replaced with a tiny but surprisingly crisp black three-piece suit under which he wore a white wing-collar shirt and plain black tie, though like every house elf Harry had ever seen, Dobby was still barefooted. Even more surprisingly, Dobby's former cringing and broken-down demeanor was now replaced by a look of cool confidence and (Harry sensed vaguely) the barest hint of haughtiness.

"Good morning, Master Harry," Dobby said cheerfully, but not quite so cheerfully as to exacerbate Harry's headache. "Dobby has completed his instructional period with Master Harry's associate Blaise Zabini and is ready to resume his service to you, sir." Then, the elf cocked his head curiously, as if noticing Harry's physical condition. He coughed softly. "And adventuresome evening last night, sir?" he asked diplomatically.

Harry nodded and tried to reply, but nothing but a scratchy gurgle came out. He cleared his throat. "Something like that," he finally managed to get out.

"Ah, Say no more, sir. Dobby shall return momentarily."

With a soft pop, Dobby vanished. Harry looked around the room in befuddlement, idly wondering if he had enough time today to get back in bed for a bit more sleep. Before he could decide one way or the other, Dobby returned bearing a silver tray upon which rested a glass goblet containing a suspicious-looking red liquid and a small brick-shaped bit of foodstuff on a saucer. Harry studied it cautiously. It looked remarkably like a Muggle power bar.

"If you would drink this, sir," Dobby said with faint smile as he held out the glass.

"S'at a potion?" Harry asked blearily.

"Regrettably, house elves are forbidden to brew *potions*, sir," Dobby replied. "It is simply a little preparation of Dobby's own concoction. Dobby believes Master Harry will find it extremely invigorating after a late evening."

"N' the other ... thing?"

"Just a little something to tide Master Harry over, as it were. Dobby regrets that Master Harry has slept through breakfast, and while Dobby would certainly be delighted to prepare a more substantial repast, he fears that his master would have no time to eat and digest before his ten o'clock meeting."

"*Oh, yeah,*" Harry thought to himself. "*Mr. X will be here at ten for his interview. Guess a granola bar probably is all I'll have time for.*"

He took the glass with a dubious expression before shrugging and tossing the whole thing back. For a few brief seconds, his nausea actually worsened and he practically had a spasm in response to the taste. But then, almost instantly, his sick feelings vanished completely, and the boy

stood upright as his headache disappeared. The effects felt almost like a Pepper-Up Potion but without any of the usual magical side effects.

"I say!" Harry exclaimed despite himself, and he realized that his sore throat had also been miraculously cured.

"Wow! That's ... remarkable! What's in it?"

"Regrettably, sir, Dobby cannot divulge that information. Secrets of the guild, one might say."

Harry nodded slowly. "Um, okay, I guess."

"Now, then, Master Harry, Dobby has consulted with the Longbottom elves regarding his master's regular schedule." He paused and looked somewhat contrite. "As an aside, Dobby is profoundly apologetic for any lapses he may have shown in anticipating your needs thus far in his employment. Dobby has been ... unwell. But Dobby guarantees Master Harry that his future service shall be impeccable."

"Good do know," Harry said slowly before biting into the breakfast bar. It was actually quite delicious for what tasted like granola, honey, and some kind of chopped fruit. Figs, maybe? As he chewed, Harry couldn't help but wonder *what in hell* Blaise did to this elf in just one day to achieve this sort of transformation.

"But Dobby digresses. Hoskins informs Dobby that Master Harry regularly rises before dawn and spends several hours cooking as a way of relieving stress. Does Harry wish to continue using Hoskins as his sous-elf, or does he desire for Dobby to assume that role? Although Master Harry will find Dobby quite proficient in the kitchen, all house elves have specialities, and, respectfully, Dobby's most efficient usage would be as a personal valet and manservant, at least while

Master Harry resides in the House of Longbottom. Also, Dobby is loathe to intrude upon Hoskins' domain, as it were, unless ordered to do so. It would be ... impolitic."

Harry stared at his *valet and manservant* for several seconds while he processed that. Honestly, he was finding the conversation almost dreamlike in its surrealism. "I'll consider the matter and let you know, Dobby."

"Very good, sir. Finally, Master Harry's dogfather has requested you to come and meet with him prior to your ten o'clock appointment."

"Dog... father," Harry asked uncertainly.

"Godfather, Master Harry. Dobby said *godfather*."

"... right," Harry sighed. "Well, then, best not to keep my *godfather* waiting. I'll go get a shower."

"Very good, sir. Dobby will prepare Master Harry's clothes for the day."

The elf popped away while Harry shook his head and went back to the bathroom.

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Fifteen minutes later, Harry stood in front of the door to Sirius Black's room. After a moment's hesitation, he knocked softly, and from inside, he heard some coughing, followed by a raspy "Enter." The boy stepped into his godfather's room.

Sirius was still in bed, naturally. Regulus had indicated that he would be many months recuperating from his time in Azkaban. Surprisingly, the physical effects of incarceration were not the worst problem. In fact, the Azkaban staff

apparently put a lot of effort into keeping their prisoners alive as long as possible, presumably to maximize their suffering. According to Augusta, Sirius would be on a regimen of healing potions for many months but should make a full recovery. Well, a full *physical* recovery, at least.

The real problem for Sirius Black was not in his body but rather in his mind and his soul, both of which had suffered terrible assault over his ten-plus years of constant Dementor exposure. Regulus compared it to the Muggle condition known as post-traumatic stress disorder, though the wizarding equivalent had more tangible effects. Whenever Sirius suffered a flashback, he would become ravaged by physical symptoms of his former suffering as his own magic caused his memories of pain and suffering to manifest bodily. The effects were not unlike those of extreme boggart exposure, but much harder to treat. It was possible that he might never fully recover from his experiences.

"Ah, Harry," Sirius said before he was interrupted with a brief coughing fit. But the brilliant smile he offered his godson belied his weakness. "Come in, come in!" He gestured to a chair near his bed which Harry took.

"How are you feeling ... Uncle Sirius?" Harry asked uncertainly. "I'm ... not sure what to call you."

"Just Sirius is fine, I guess. I haven't been around to look after you and your family like I should, so I get why you don't actually have any *familial* connection to me."

"That's hardly your fault," Harry chided.

"Maybe, maybe not," Sirius replied somewhat bitterly. "But as impossible as it seems, I let Wormtail get the best of me and paid the price."

"Wormtail," Harry said. "That's an odd nickname. Where did it come from?"

Sirius grimaced. "Can't tell, I'm afraid. Took an oath. A stupid one as it turned out." He sighed dejectedly. "Doesn't really matter. He doesn't deserve the name anyway."

Then, he shook himself, as if to fight off encroaching depression. Sirius smiled again at his godson. "So, enough about that. We didn't get to talk for very long last night before you rushed out. And I know you've got a meeting with some Legilimency bloke in a little bit, but I'd like to ask a few questions, if you don't mind."

"Okay," Harry said cautiously. "Where do you want to start?"

"Well, you're at Hogwarts, I know. What house are you in?"

Harry opened his mouth and then shut it swiftly. "*Yeah, Dogfather,*" he thought to himself. "*Why don't we start with that. Oh well, might as well rip the band-aid off all at once.*"

"I'll be a Third Year next month. I was Sorted into Slytherin."

Sirius stared at him unblinkingly for several seconds. Then, he snickered softly. "So that explains it."

"Explains what?" Harry asked quizzically.

"This morning, Augusta came in here to join me for breakfast. I said a few unkind things about Slytherins, and she rather pointedly told me never to disparage anyone for being a Slytherin while I was in her house. That it was four Slytherins who rescued me from Azkaban because they were committed to destroying You-Know-Who, and if I

couldn't respect their efforts enough to stop bad-mouthing their house, she'd put Draught of Living Death in my tea and lock me up in the attic until this whole horcrux-hunt business was over."

They both laughed at that.

"Of course," he continued. "She neglected to mention your Sorting or the names of any of my rescuers other than Reg. Were you actually one of the four who helped save me?"

"Well, I didn't go to Azkaban or anything exciting like that, but I helped however I could."

"Thank you," Sirius said simply. "Augusta was right. I have ... *issues* with Slytherins. I know that, and I'm not sure I'll ever get over them. Nearly every Slytherin I went to school with either joined the Death Eaters or ended up dead at a Death Eater's hands for being a blood traitor. But I promise you, I will *never* hold your Sorting against you."

"I'm glad to hear that," Harry replied.

"So, how did James react when he got the news? I may have had issues with Slytherins, but he had whole bound volumes."

Harry shrugged. "He didn't take it well, but that was a long time ago. He seems to be over it."

Sirius grinned. "I'll bet he made some big ridiculous scene."

Harry nodded slowly. "Yeah ... I guess you could call it that," he said evasively.

"Ha! I knew it. What did he do? I can't wait to rag on him about it, you know, after I get cleared."



The boy looked down at the floor. Sirius noticed and his smile faded to be replaced with a look of concern. "Harry? What did James do?"

Harry looked away for a moment before answering. "He got drunk. And then, he sent me a Howler that went off in the Great Hall during my first breakfast at Hogwarts. Among other things, he said if put one foot out of line, he'd disown me, snap my wand, and send me back to the Dursleys."

By now, Sirius's look of concern was replaced by one of horror. "He ... what?!"

"Sirius, it's okay. Believe me. It was pretty awful in the beginning, but we've both worked hard to get past it and become a family again."

"Uh-huh. And that's why you're spending your summers with Augusta Longbottom instead of that family you just mentioned?"

Harry made a sour face. "Well, okay then. I guess I *should* say we're both *working* hard to get past it, even though we're not there yet."

Sirius said nothing for a moment as he thought about what his godson had said. "*Back* ... to the Dursleys. Who are the Dursleys? And why was sending you back to them a punishment that was on the table?"

"Sirius..."

"Harry, please. I want to know everything. Do you mean to say that you didn't even live with James and Lily while you were growing up?"

The boy looked up at the ceiling as if trying to decide how far down this rabbit hole he wanted to go. He saw little need to open up his own wounds, particularly if it might cause his godfather to become ill again, but he also felt the man wouldn't drop it until he had the basic picture.

"When I was a baby, several healers and also Professor Dumbledore came to the mistaken conclusion that I was a squib, and James and Lily thought it best to have me shipped off to live with Petunia and Vernon Dursley, Lily's sister and brother-in-law. I stayed with them until I started Hogwarts."

"Petunia and...!" Sirius sputtered. "That awful horse-faced wench whose letters made Lily cry at school?! And I suppose Vernon was that mustachioed whale she married!"

Harry did a double-take. "*You* went to Petunia and Vernon's wedding?!"

"No, of course not. But your mother kept one of their wedding photos on the mantle at Godric's Hollow, so I know what they looked like. *Petunia* didn't even want Lily and James to attend their wedding, but your maternal grandmother Rose insisted. Though that didn't stop them from insulting your parents every chance they got. James was livid when he got home."

Sirius shook his head in amazement before studying his godson more carefully.

"And you lived with them until you turned eleven? And now you're living here with the Longbottoms?" His eyes narrowed. "How did they treat you, Harry?"

"It's not important. I won't be going back there."

"Harry ..."

"Sirius," he interrupted calmly but firmly. "It *really* doesn't matter anymore."

There was a brief silence between the two that was broken when Hoskins popped into the room bearing a serving tray.

"Begging the two gentlemen's pardon, but Hoskins has Lord Black's ten o'clock potion. Also, Master Harry, your own ten o'clock appointment has arrived, and Her Ladyship requests your presence."

"I'd better go," the boy said.

Sirius nodded. "Yeah, that's fine. This potion will knock me out cold for a few hours at least. But I'd like to talk some more after your meeting. We don't have to talk about James or the Dursleys or anything. I just want to get to know my godson better."

"Sure," Harry said warmly. Sirius watched the boy leave, and as soon as the door closed, his relaxed expression became pensive. "*Dammit, James!*" he thought furiously. "*What the hell have you been doing all these years!*"

---

***At that same moment, at the Granger Residence in Crawley...***

Hermione looked up from her reading at the sound of a soft tapping at her window. It was the mid-morning Post Owl bearing a copy of the *Daily Prophet*. She frowned. At Hogwarts, her copy was always delivered at breakfast, and she knew from conversations with Neville and Blaise that it was the same for them at home, even for Blaise who traveled extensively during the summers. Yet her copy

delivered to a Muggle address in Crawley always came hours later and sometimes not until the afternoon. Idly, she wondered if Wizarding culture was actually so petty about blood purity that even newspaper deliveries for Muggleborns got bumped to the end of the list. She pushed the idea aside for the moment. There was no use in looking for soft bigotries everywhere, for she was sure to find it whether it existed or not. She paid the owl and handed it a treat before taking the newspaper over to her writing desk. The headline was every bit as lurid as she'd come to expect from the newspaper. She wondered if the wizards had learned about "journalism" from reading Rupert Murdoch's tabloids.

### **DEMENTORS UNLEASHED!**

**FUDGE UNVEILS CONTROVERSIAL NEW PLAN!  
WILL USE DEMENTORS TO GUARD HOGWARTS AGAINST  
DEATH EATER MENACE!**

Hermione sighed loudly and hard enough to ruffle the bangs of her frizzy hair. Then, she set the paper aside and pulled out the *Monster Book of Monsters* that she'd recently purchased. She stroked the spine for a few moments until the book calmed down and then opened it up and flipped through to the section on Dementors. After a few minutes of review, she set the book aside with an even bigger sigh and reached for the list of school supplies she'd been working on. She added one item to the bottom and then frowned.

*"How on earth am I going to persuade Mummy and Daddy, both dentists, to let me take a large supply of chocolate to school with me?!"*

---

## ***Meanwhile, back in the Longbottom conference room***

...

Six people sat around the great circular table, and Harry studied the five adults casually. Mr. Malfoy and Lady Augusta looked as composed as always, while Reg was back in his Mr. Cato face, that of an older vaguely-familiar man with Chinese features. Upon meeting him, Mr. X actually crooked an eyebrow, and when Lady Augusta actually introduced him as "Mr. Cato," he almost seemed amused before his Occlumency clouded his features once more.

As the group took their places around the table, Harry contemplated his peculiar relationship with Mr. X. He could count on one hand the adults he trusted implicitly and have a thumb left over. Artie, Augusta, Snape (to an extent – Harry understood that his relationship with Dumbledore introduced *complexities* to their relationship), and Mr. X. Even Reg and Malfoy he didn't trust completely. Both were former Princes of Slytherin and both had their own agendas which were congruent with his for the moment but could easily diverge under the right circumstances. Honestly, Harry suspected that if Voldemort actually did return to full power, the odds of Lucius turning on them to rush back to his former master were somewhere around 50-50. Of course, Harry *had* to trust Mr. X in a way. Their relationship as mentor-student meant that Mr. X was privy to Harry's innermost secrets other than those protected by the magic of the Lair, and while the Memory Lock ensured he wouldn't remember anything he learned, the man had never once given the impression of either judging or pitying Harry for what he discovered, a kindness which the boy genuinely appreciated.

And yet despite all that, Harry still knew very little about the man himself. All he'd ever let slip during their sessions

was that he had a wife and children, and the complex web of Notice-Me-Not Charms and other glamours concealing the man's identity meant that Harry was literally incapable of directly perceiving anything about his true appearance and wouldn't even recognize his tutor if he bumped into the man on the street. He simply had an impression of an incredibly bland and ordinary individual with absolutely no memorable features save a tendency toward dry humor and occasional sarcasm.

In fact, Harry suddenly thought, technically even Mr. X's gender could have occluded, and it was entirely possible that his teacher had been a woman this whole time. But Harry found that unlikely. Even if he couldn't perceive any details about Mr. X's true appearance, he'd dropped enough clues at least to hint at being male, and not even Harry could fathom the insane level of paranoia needed to pretend to be of a different gender just to make a few galleons from tutoring. He was still amazed that Reg had actually transformed himself into the form of a beautiful Nordic blonde woman in order to seduce Michael Proudfoot and steal some of his hair. Harry wasn't sure exactly how far Auror Proudfoot and "Maria Gambrelli" had gone as part of that ruse, but Reg once muttered disdainfully that Proudfoot wasn't his "type." And also that he had bad breath.

Unlike Marcus Flint, the conspiracy would not be binding Mr. X to an Unbreakable Vow at first. Instead, he would simply be swearing a high-level secrecy oath which would strike him with an extremely debilitating curse if he revealed anything he learned during this initial meeting. For that alone, Malfoy was paying him 1,000 galleons for an hour of his time with the understanding that he would consent to a Memory Lock if he did not wish to proceed any further. If, on the other hand, he was agreeable to helping

them (at a fairly outrageous price), he would reveal his true identity and swear an Unbreakable Vow.

"Now, to business," Mr. X after completing his secrecy vow. "And I am most eager to find out what the business is that requires such high levels of secrecy and also involves such esteemed personages as Lucius Malfoy and Augusta Longbottom. To say nothing of the reclusive squib manservant and subsequent heir to the notorious Gilderoy Lockhart. Mr. ... *Cato*, I believe you said?"

"Yes," the metamorphmagus said amiably. "That's the name."

"Of course it is," said Mr. X with a drawl.

Harry frowned. There was some subtext here that he was missing, but he thought he detected a whiff of disdain from Mr. X directed towards Reg's current persona. "*Is Mr. X bigoted towards Asians?*" he thought curiously.

"Let us get straight to the point, Mr. X," said Augusta. "You are here today because we desire your aid in bringing about the final destruction of You-Know-Who."

Mr. X stared. "I see. Most people are under the impression that the Dark Lord's destruction was achieved twelve years ago through the power of the Boy-Who-Lived. I am ... aware that Mr. Potter here believes differently, but I should like to know what your cabal has uncovered that leads you to think you can succeed where so many others have failed. Also, I must admit to some surprise as to *your* involvement, Mr. Malfoy, given your own *history* with the Dark Lord."

Malfoy puffed up a bit. "As I'm sure you know, sir, I was found not guilty of being a Death Eater due to an ironclad Imperius defense. In any case, whether you believe I was a

Death Eater or not, let me assure you that my current opposition to the Dark Lord is implacable."

"Indeed," Mr. X said languidly. "So how, exactly, do you all propose to destroy the Dark Lord? And what will my role in these machinations be?"

Augusta spoke. "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named secured for himself a limited form of immortality through the use of cursed objects known as horcruxes, into each of which he has inserted a fraction of his very soul. As long as these objects endure, he can never truly be slain. Presently, he exists in a spirit-like form in which he is able to possess others and potentially communicate with his supporters. And we believe it is possible for him to eventually reconstitute a body for himself unless all of his horcruxes are destroyed first."

"To that end," continued Malfoy, "we have liberated the Dark Lord's most trusted advisors from Azkaban. It is our desire for you to probe them with Legilimency to determine if any of them know anything about the nature and location of his horcruxes, as well as exactly how many horcruxes he made if it be known."

Not all of Mr. X's poise and Occlumency could keep the shock from his face. "You?! You people engineered a breakout from the most dangerous prison in the world? And your purpose was simply to interrogate the Dark Lord's five most dangerous and loyal followers? I cannot decide whether to describe your actions as bold or deranged!"

"Why can't they be both?" Mr. Cato asked mischievously. "And I'd like to correct you on one point. We broke out four of You-Know-Who's closest followers and one innocent man.



We believe that Sirius Black is innocent of the crimes of which he was accused."

Mr. X went silent for several seconds, and when he spoke, his voice was suddenly very cold and precise. "I'm sorry. Could you repeat that?" Across the table, Harry stiffened as his curiosity suddenly became concern for reasons he couldn't articulate even to himself. He focused all of his Legilimency awareness on his tutor.

"Exactly what I said," continued Mr. Cato who was oblivious to Harry's growing apprehension. "We believe Black is innocent. We'd also like your assistance in proving that if you can, as well as your help in healing the mental damage he's suffered."

Mr. X nodded slowly. "And where is the poor innocent Sirius Black now?"

"Um, Cato?" Harry began nervously as his apprehension blossomed into outright alarm, but Augusta spoke over him.

"The four Death Eaters are incapacitated in the dungeon beneath this house, but Lord Black is resting comfortably in a bedroom right down the hall..."

Suddenly, before Augusta could continue, there was a blur of motion from the Occlumens. His wand seemed to appear from nowhere, and he stabbed it at the table which instantly dissolved into a whirlwind of sawdust that blew into the faces of those others present. Forewarned, Harry dove for cover, while Mr. X targeted Cato before the other man could recover from his surprise. "**INCARCEROUS!**" he shouted. The spell struck with such force that it knocked the man out of his chair before leaving him bound and lying on the floor.

Augusta and Lucius were quicker to respond despite the sawdust whirlwind which now seemed to be more of a distraction than an actual attack. Malfoy lashed out with a Stunner, only for Mr. X to casually parry it straight into Augusta Longbottom who fell to the ground before she could utter a single spell. Then, for good measure, Mr. X chained his parry into another spell, one Harry had never heard of before. "**LEVICORPUS!**"

Suddenly, Malfoy was jerked off the ground by his right foot and suspended upside down several feet above the floor, and he dropped his wand in surprise. Nearby, Cato's eyes widened, and he glared at Mr. X before closing his eyes in concentration. From behind a nearby sofa, Harry yelled out to the Occlumens.

"Why are you doing this?!" he exclaimed in a fury.

"Stay out of this, *Potter*. Don't think about trying to intervene unless you want the Ministry drawn to the scene for your underage magic!"

"I chose you for this because I trusted you!" Harry yelled angrily. "You swore an oath!"

Mr. X sneered. "Yes, Potter, I swore an oath of secrecy, but that was all. And I can assure you I will take to my grave the tale of how I *killed* that miserable bastard Sirius Black!" The man started to turn to the door but was then distracted and did a double-take. While he was talking to Harry, Mr. Cato had somehow stretched himself from a somewhat short Asian man to one who would be over seven-feet-tall if standing upright. His arms and torso had grown incredibly thin as a result, and Cato had successfully wriggled out of his conjured ropes and was now pulling out his own wand.

Angrily, Mr. X targeted Cato for a Stunner, but just before he could fire, Harry dilated his perceptions so that he could time his move. At the last second, Harry hurled himself forward and took the Stunner in place of his ally, Cato. The boy dropped to the floor and slid into the wall already unconscious. Shocked by the self-sacrifice, Mr. X was unable to defend himself when Cato fired off an Expelliarmus that knocked the man across the room while sending his own wand into Cato's waiting hand. For good measure, Cato then fired off an Incarcerous of his own to bind Mr. X before pulling off the rest of his ropes and climbing to his feet. As he did, he shrank back down to his normal height before casting Renervate spells on Harry and Augusta.

"Well," said Lucius irritably with as much poise as he could muster while hanging upside down by his ankle. "Kindly don't leave me hanging, if you'll pardon the pun." Harry was suddenly pleased that Malfoy's devotion to wizarding traditions did not extend to robes with nothing but underpants beneath them, and the man's anachronistic but otherwise Mugglish suit kept everything in its proper place.

"Sorry, Lucius," Cato said. "That's a very special curse that I've seen in action but never had the chance to learn. Unless you know the specific countercurse, you can't break it until it wears off after about an hour."

"And let me guess," Malfoy grumbled. "You don't know the countercurse."

"No," Cato replied as he moved towards the bound and seething Mr. X with his wand pointed and ready for any further attack. Harry moved to stand next to him, his face still a mask of shock and betrayal.

"Happily though," Cato continued, "I believe that the spell's creator is close at hand. ***REVELIO!***"

The spell washed over Mr. X, and slowly his generic unmemorable hair darkened to a slick black, his generic clothes changed to ebon robes with perhaps too many buttons, and his generic face morphed into sallow features with a nose that seemed entirely too big for the face. Harry gasped. Mr. X was gone, and now it was the familiar face of Severus Snape that glared up at them both with an expression of boundless fury.

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### ***Five minutes later ...***

"Explain!" Harry said irritably.

"Manners, Potter," Snape said imperiously. "I am still your teacher and am owed a measure of respect."

The group had reassembled back back in their chairs around the pile of dust that was all that remained of what Lady Augusta grumpily described as "a Hepplewhite table that's been in the family since 1810." Snape had been allowed his wand long enough to countercurse Malfoy (Harry made a mental note of the wand movement and the incantation, *Liberacorpus*), but Mr. Cato then confiscated it once more and handed it off to Malfoy who secreted it inside his jacket. Now, Harry and all the grownups sat guardedly with three of the adults pointing their wands at the fourth. Harry was not pointing a wand for obvious reasons, which was a good thing as he was having more difficulty than usual in suppressing his temper. In fact, he was probably angrier now than at any point since he'd started studying Occlumency.

"Don't talk to me about respect, *sir*," Harry said through gritted teeth. "It's summer, and school is out. And I don't expect to consider Mr. X a teacher of any sort ever again."

"Harry, calm down," said Cato.

"No, don't anyone tell me to calm down." He glared almost murderously at the Potions Master. "Not ten minutes ago, I was actually thought to myself that there were at most four adults in the world I really, truly trusted. Four! And I have just learned that two of them were actually *the same person who has been lying to me from the start!* So I'll ask again – explain yourself!"

Snape let out a long-suffering sigh. "If you will recall, Mr. Potter, I was the one who first detected your natural skill at Legilimency and realized that you would likely become a skilled Occlumens as well if led to apply yourself. I quickly realized that, modesty aside, there was simply no one else in Britain who could possibly teach you as well as myself, with the possible exception of the Headmaster, who you would never accept as an instructor, and a few certain individuals with Death Eater connections who were as likely to murder you as teach you. And yet, I also knew that even if you agreed to let me instruct you, an uncertain prospect at best, you would never develop your abilities to their height under my guidance. Teaching the psychic arts requires a powerful bond of trust, and between me being your head of house, my oaths to the Headmaster, and my ... relationships with both your parents and also your brother, I knew you would never trust Severus Snape enough to fulfill your potential."

"So you invented Mr. X and then encouraged me to study under him," Harry concluded in a cold voice.

"Don't overexaggerate your own importance, Potter. I didn't invent that persona just for you. Mr. X really is the anonymous identity I use for teaching private Occlumency and Legilimency lessons during the summers to supplement my income. Despite or perhaps because of the rarity of the two gifts, teaching either or both of them is a very lucrative field, and my reputation as Mr. X is well-known, at least among the somewhat insular subculture of devotees of the psychic arts. After you acquiesced to my recommendations about studying Occlumency, it was a simple matter to arrange for Mr. X's resume to pass into the hands of your solicitor who hired me on the merits. And also at a significant discount on my usual fee, I might add."

Harry rolled his eyes but then furrowed his brow in confusion. "Hang on, a minute! You said you had a wife and two kids!"

"Oh think it through, Potter! You're a Legilimency deductive genius. Unless I diverted you somehow, it was inevitable that some slip-up would allow you to realize that Mr. X and Severus Snape were the same person. So I made a maudlin display of tearfully revealing the existence of a fictitious family for whose safety I was concerned. You accepted that at face value and thereafter ignored any points of comparison between the two personas."

Snape's statement shocked Harry, and as he thought about it, he realized it was the truth. He'd actually lost count of the number of times that he'd noticed how much Mr. X reminded him of Snape, especially in their shared tendency towards biting wit, but he'd never considered the possibility of them being the same person.

"Is that why Mr. X constantly insulted Severus Snape and discouraged me from following his advice?"

"In part. But it was also valuable to your training. As Severus Snape, I could drive you to develop your powers to the fullest, while as Mr. X, I could warn you about the potential risks of pushing too hard. And also, I suppose, about the dangers of placing too much trust in someone with loyalties as conflicting and complicated as mine. Whose advice you chose to follow was ultimately your own choice. Besides, at this point in my life, sarcasm is second-nature to me, and by directing it at myself, I further separate the two personalities in your mind."

"Speaking of sarcasm," Malfoy interrupted, "this is all *fascinating*. But can we please get back to this matter for which I've paid a thousand galleons just to ensure your presence here. You know what is at stake with the Dark Lord's horcruxes. Will you help us? That is, I suppose, without making the murder of Sirius Black a precondition?"

Snape sat and thought for a long moment. "I will swear an oath to maintain the secrecy of your cabal and its agenda and also to aid you in probing the minds of your captives, but *only* to the extent it is safe for me to do so. The Lestranges have all had Occlumency training from Augustus Rookwood, and a probe of their minds could be highly dangerous unless undertaken with the utmost care. I believe I can penetrate the defenses of the three Lestranges, but you are all being quite naive if you think it can be done anytime soon. It would likely take weeks to prepare myself for even a preliminary scan. And I will tell you all right now, I would never attempt to enter the mind of Augustus Rookwood unless I were persuaded that the fate of the world depended on it."

All of the conspirators looked dismayed at that news. Finally, Augusta spoke.

"We quite understand, Professor Snape. And I hesitate to ask, but about Lord Black...?"

Snape barked out a laugh. "So he's a *Lord* now? Typical! No, Lady Longbottom. I will not lift a finger to help that animal in any way. If it is essential to defeat the Dark Lord, then I will swear an oath not to raise my wand against him except in self-defense until the Dark Lord is finally defeated. But once that is done, Sirius Black and I will have a reckoning. Of that, I can promise you."

Throughout Snape's speech, Mr. Cato grew progressively angrier, but it was Lucius who spoke first.

"What exactly is the source of your obvious hatred for Sirius Black beyond schoolyard rivalries?" he inquired. "We are certain that he was never actually a Death Eater."

"Frankly, I don't give a damn whether he was a Death Eater or not," Snape snapped. "Either way, he was a cruel, vicious bastard who deserved what happened to him." Then, the Potions Master turned his attention to the fuming Mr. Cato. "But before I say anything more, since we're all laying our cards on the table, perhaps Sirius Black's brother *Regulus* might do me the courtesy of dropping that ridiculous disguise and showing his true face!"

Silence fell on the room, and Cato's expression of anger was replaced by one of astonishment. "How long have you known?" he finally asked.

Snape snorted. "I've had most of the clues for months, but it was only in the last few minutes that all of the pieces fell into place. I was the first to suspect Gilderoy Lockhart's imposture by an unknown wizard with some form of shapeshifting magic after I noticed his apparent ignorance of events from the real Lockhart's school days. I reported



my suspicions to James Potter, but naturally the imbecile leapt to the wrong conclusion and assumed that it was the real Lockhart who had simply gone dark. The newspaper accounts of Lockhart's histrionic confession followed by his apparent self-lobotomy – not to mention the report of him leaving all of his wealth to *an Asian squib manservant named Cato* – strongly suggested that the shapeshifter had simply assumed a new identity after disposing of the real Lockhart. However, I kept my suspicions to myself because I could not prove anything nor could I divine why the mystery shapeshifter posed as the Hogwarts Defense instructor in the first place. But when the Azkaban breakout occurred and was apparently facilitated through shapeshifting magic, I realized that the imposter was involved and as Lockhart had tricked the best and brightest of the Hogwarts student body into giving him the means to defeat Azkaban's defenses."

He smirked at Cato who was still speechless. "And *then*, I was invited here to finally meet the elusive Mr. Cato and more connections were made. I realized at once that the shapeshifter was raised as a Pureblood but later spend considerable time either among Muggles or in some foreign Magical culture where association with Muggles was more common than Britain. I also knew that the only known British Metamorphmagus of this era was Nymphadora Tonks who inherited her gift from the Blacks. Your personal interest in exonerating Sirius Black was the final clue I needed. Obviously, Regulus Black was a secret metamorphmagus who faked his own death and fled Britain for either the Muggle world or a foreign Magical society with strong Muggle ties, and he stayed there for many years before returning in the guise of Gilderoy Lockhart in order to manipulate the top Hogwarts students into giving him the means to rescue his miscreant brother from prison."

Snape glanced over at Harry and sniffed disdainfully. "I may not have born with your *natural* affinity for the deductive aspects of Legilimency, Mr. Potter, but I *am* a master Legilimens, and that includes developing such skills."

Cato shook his head in confusion. "How did you know that I was a Pureblood who went Muggle?!"

"Elementary, my dear Regulus," he said smugly. "For one thing, only an insular paranoid Pureblood family like the Blacks could have concealed the existence of a Metamorphmagus from the Conscription List. But more importantly, only someone thoroughly immersed in Muggle culture would be aware of the existence of a somewhat obscure Muggle fictional character such Cato from the *Pink Panther* film series. And *only a Pureblood* would be so *fatuous* as to disguise himself as Cato from the *Pink Panther* film series and never imagine that his false identity might be *obvious* to any Muggle-born or Muggle-raised wizards he encountered. Honestly, Regulus! I lived among British Muggles throughout the 1960's and 70's! *Of course, I know who Burt Kwouk is!*"

The others all turned to look at Cato who was suddenly blushing.

"Burt ... Kwouk?" Harry inquired.

"He's a Muggle actor. He, um, he played Inspector Clouseau's manservant Cato in the, ah, *Pink Panther* movies." The others continued to stare at him. "They're really very funny. *A Shot In the Dark* was my favorite. You should watch them sometime." More staring. Finally, he sighed loudly and shook his head vigorously to reset his appearance to that of Regulus Black.

"Better?" he asked Snape.

"Marginally," Snape drawled.

"Professor Snape," said Augusta. "I know what Sirius Black was like when you were at school together. My son Frank spoke of James Potters band of hooligans many times. But you both graduated from Hogwarts nearly a quarter-century ago. In the face of a crisis as serious as a reborn You-Know-Who, surely you can put aside whatever bad memories you have of his past bullying."

Snape straightened in his chair. "With all due respect, Lady Augusta, It was *far more* than childish bullying. When I knew him last, Sirius Black was a psychopath, and I have no reason to think that a decade in Azkaban has improved either his disposition or his character."

Regulus's lip curled in disgust. "You know, Severus, I must say I really do find it astonishing to see what a monumental hypocrite you've grown up to be. Breath-taking really."

Snape's eyes flashed dangerously, and Lucius casually shifted in his seat. Snape's wand was still in his pocket, and he didn't want the other man to summon it wandlessly and resume conflict. Like Augusta, he grieved slightly for the ruined Hepplewhite table and wished to see no more irreplaceable antiques destroyed today.

"How. *Dare*. You!" Snape hissed at Regulus.

"Oh knock it off, Severus," the other man interrupted. "It's *me*. Regulus Black! I was a Slytherin just one year behind you. We spent six years sharing a dormitory. I *know* you. You may have ruined your friendship with Lily Evans by losing your temper and calling her a Mudblood to her face, but we both know how free you were with that word while it was just other Slytherins around. And you may never have bullied anyone personally, but you were

perfectly happy to be the evil genius behind Mulciber, Rosier, and Avery. We both know that nearly every dark curse they learned at Hogwarts came from you."

"Do not presume to equate the childish pranks of Mulciber and Avery with what Sirius ...!"

"MARY McDONALD!" Regulus shouted angrily. Instantly, Snape went silent with his mouth still hanging open in surprise.

"Oh," Reg continued in a more reasonable tone of voice. "So you *do* remember poor Mary McDonald. Or as I believe you used to refer to her, "that jumped-up little Mudblood from Aberdeen." Refresh my memory, Severus. Did Mary McDonald ever return to Hogwarts after that breakdown she had during her OWLS? For that matter, were the mind healers at St. Mungo's ever able to cure her of that persistent delusion that she had cockroaches crawling around under her skin?"

Harry looked from Reg to Snape in shock, and Snape himself bore an expression of shame that the boy had never imagined his rigidly-controlled teacher could display.

"What happened to Mary McDonald was ... unfortunate," Snape said much more quietly. "A schoolboy prank that went wrong." Then, he looked up at Reg, determination returning to his face. "While I regret it, it was not comparable to what Sirius Black did to me."

"No? Then share with us, Severus. What exactly did my brother, who was only two months older than you, ever do to you that was as bad as what you helped Mulciber do to Mary McDonald."

Snape locked eyes with Regulus, and a fierce righteous anger seemed to fill him.

"He tried to murder me, Regulus."

Silence reigned.

"I don't believe you," Regulus finally said in a quiet voice.

"Believe what you want, Regulus, but it is the truth. In the fall of 1976, your brother Sirius deliberately and with malice aforethought tried to bring about my death. I cannot reveal all the details due to oaths I was compelled to swear for the protection of innocent parties. But make no mistake. Sirius Black actively tried to murder me, and he only failed because of the last-minute intervention of James Potter to whom I owe a life debt over the matter even though I know perfectly well that the arrogant sod only acted to save me to prevent his friends from being harmed or punished for Black's actions. Sirius Black tried to kill me, and I shall never forgive him for it."

"No one is asking you to embrace the man as a boon companion, Severus," said Lucius while wearing a speculative expression. "Merely that you work with us and by extension him. If the passage of time cannot heal your wounds, what else would do it?"

"There is not enough gold in all the Malfoy vaults to persuade me to work with Sirius Black." Snape said with a sneer.

Lucius smiled. "Well actually, I wasn't going to offer gold from the *Malfoy* vaults ... *Regent Prince*."

Snape went very still. "... what?"

"I have found you an Heir, Severus. A wizard of the line of Prince. Someone who can exercise a legal claim to the Prince seat but who, for a number of reasons, cannot formally take it for at least three years and perhaps as many as ten. Someone who is willing to reinstate you to the Prince family and appoint *you* as his Regent until he comes of age. Someone also willing to share with his only magical kin the bounty of the Prince vaults in exchange for helping to transition fully into our world."

"A Muggleborn descended from squibs of the Prince line," Snape said slowly. Then, his expression hardened. "And you think dangling the Prince inheritance in front of me is enough for me to let go of my hatred of Sirius Black?"

"I *think* that dangling the Prince inheritance was enough to get you *to take the Dark Mark*, my old friend. A decision that you have regretted ever since. And I *think* that offering you that inheritance once more, conditional on you doing whatever you can to help *defeat* the Dark Lord, will purge you of those regrets."

"*And just like that*," Harry thought to himself, "*Malfoy's got him*." The boy marveled internally at what he'd just witnessed, a demonstration of why Lucius Malfoy had been worthy to become a Prince of Slytherin. Some Princes had magical gifts that eased the way like Parseltongue or Metamorphmagic. But others, like Lucius, simply had a knack for knowing what people wanted and how to get it for them.

The group spent the remainder of the hour discussing terms before Snape left for Hogwarts. One of his terms was that he would need the Headmaster's permission to miss school on those occasions he returned here to psychically interrogate their prisoners, though naturally he would not

be able to explain the true reasons for his absence. But assuming Dumbledore consented, Snape was on board. He even promised to try to help Sirius with his various mental issues, but only while Sirius "keeps a civil tongue in his empty head."

Later that afternoon, Harry went to visit Sirius once again after the man's long nap.

"So how did your meeting go?" Sirius said groggily. "Is your Occlumency guy on board?"

"... he is," Harry replied.

"Good news. I look forward to meeting him sometime."

"Yeah," Harry said with his best fake smile. "That'll definitely be an interesting conversation."

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**9:00 p.m.**

**Cauchemar Abbey**

**Dark Peak Moor, Derbyshire**

Cassius Warrington fought down the urge to adjust his collar as he struggled to eat his *Bisque de Crevettes* without dribbling it down the front of his shirt. It was the boy's first visit to Cauchemar Abbey, the ancestral home of the Selwyn family since some time around the Eighth Century. Initially, Cassius had thrown a bit of a tantrum which his father had told him the night before that he would be attending a "family dinner party" when he'd already made plans to spend the weekend with Miles Bletchley. He complained rather loudly about the imposition ... and then was shocked into obedience when his father slapped him for the first time in his life. He was even more

shocked when he looked up at his father and realized that the man wasn't angry with him.

He was afraid.

Cassius put that insight out of his mind and focused on his soup. He had no idea what *Bisque de Crevettes* was though he suspected it was something to do with shrimp. He also had no idea what "Cauchemar" meant beyond the fact that, like his soup, it was something French. Probably something awful to judge by the frighteningly oppressive architecture and Gothic furniture in the old manse. He'd ask Miranda about the name, as she spoke French, but the girl was no longer on speaking terms with him.

Which made things rather tense since the girl was sitting to his left and resolutely ignoring him.

Though not directly related to the House of Selwyn, Miranda Bonnevie was a part of the extended family by way of the Warringtons. Specifically, she was the niece of Cassius's mother, Juliana Warrington *née* Bonnevie. It had been his family's hope that the Bonnevie's might someday be brought into the larger Selwyn family network, thereby extending the Selwyns' reach into France where most of the Bonnevie's reside. But all his parents' work on that front had apparently been ruined by Cassius's disastrous screw-up the previous term. The plan had been to lead Jim Potter, the Heir of Slytherin, into a greater appreciation of dark magic and eventually Pureblood ideology. It ended with Cassius suspended and forced to repeat Fourth Year and Miranda expelled and on her way to finish her last year of education at Beauxbatons. Understandably, relations between the Warringtons and the Bonnevie's were *strained*, which was why it surprised Cassius when his father announced that Miranda would be coming with them to



tonight's dinner party. Surprised and perhaps troubled. Cassius Warrington was by no means the most astute of Slytherins, but even he was aware of a terrible undercurrent of tension that flowed beneath every bit of casual dinner conversation so far. It was as though nearly everyone in the room was waiting for an axe to fall. But on whose neck?

Cassius looked around the room. The throne-like chair at the head of the long table was empty. It had been reserved for Adramalech Selwyn who had been Lord Selwyn since before Cassius's *grandfather* had been born. But these days, Lord Selwyn was rarely seen out in public, or even in private for that matter. Cassius assumed it was due to declining health since he was pretty sure the man was over 160 years old. To either side of empty chair sat an elderly witch and a positively ancient wizard, Auntie Camilla and Great-Uncle Merihem, Adramalech's younger siblings. Merihem's grand-daughter, Cassilda (the House Seneshal despite her youth) sat between Merihem and Aldones Selwyn, Cassilda's father and Merihem's son. Cassilda's older brother Hyades, a neckless hulk of a wizard who rarely spoke, sat beside Auntie Camilla. One thing that had been drummed into Cassius's head by his parents was that Adramalech was Grandfather, Camilla was Auntie, and Merihem was Great-Uncle. Their given names were not to be used in casual conversation, and their actual familial relationships were deemed irrelevant. As for the rest, anyone outside one's immediate family was simply "Cousin" regardless of any actual family relationships.

Moving down from the head of the table, Corban Yaxley sat with his three children: two boys (Giles and Albert) who attended Durmstrang and a daughter (Viola) who would be head girl at Beauxbatons this upcoming year. It was expected that she would help Miranda "adjust" to her new

situation. After the Yaxleys came the Carrows. Amycus and Alecto sat across from each other, and each had one of the identical twins, Hestia and Flora, sitting beside them.

Cassius had once jokingly asked his father whether Amycus and Alecto were brother-and-sister, husband-and-wife, or both. His father immediately grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him furiously while shouting almost hysterically "*Never ask such things where anyone else might hear!*"

Flora and Hestia rarely spoke at dinner, but they constantly gave each other significant looks, as though they could hear one another's thoughts. They also took turns glancing at Cassius and smirking, as if to suggest to him that they knew something vitally important that he did not.

The Warringtons were seated near the far end of the table from the great chair, and even Cassius was not so oblivious as to miss the significance of the seating arrangements. The only one farther away from the Selwyn end of the table was poor, pitiful Uriah Travers who ignored everyone else while slowly drinking himself into a stupor. His wife, brother, and two of his sons had died during the Wizarding War, while his third son was a convicted Death Eater who was *not* among those that had been rescued from Azkaban earlier in the week. Uriah never took the Dark Mark and even gave testimony against his son which is what secured his own freedom and Lordship, but now, twelve years later, he had nothing left to offer anyone save the five votes he cast in the Selwyns' favor whenever called upon to do so. Whenever he eventually finished drinking himself to death, the House of Travers would likely die with him.

The food was excellent, as to be expected for an Ancient and Noble House at the height of its power, though poor Cassius, who had not received the deportment training one might expect of, say, a Malfoy or a Longbottom, struggled a bit with which fork to use on each course. And each misstep

brought another smirk from the Carrow girls which only caused the boy to grow angrier as the meal progressed. Through it all, however, there were no discussions of politics or current affairs which, as Auntie Camilla reminded everyone, were not proper topics for the dinner table. Discussion instead focused on banal observations about fashion, Quidditch, recent theater productions, and the occasional Mudblood joke.

Finally, after the dessert plates were taken away, everyone moved from the dining room to a large study and billiard room where the house elves served drinks: butterbeer for the minors, wine for most of the women, scotch for most of the men. Cousin Cassilda, Auntie Camilla, and Great-Uncle Merihem eschewed all those drink options in favor of a thick ruby-red beverage that looked like some sort of cherry cordial served in tall fluted glasses. The house elves served the drinks in silence, and none of them so much as made eye contact with anyone in the room. Cassilda took a sip from her drink, licked her lips as if to savor the taste, and then leaned back against a billiard table before addressing the group.

"Let me begin by saying that Grandfather is still resting and will not be joining us this evening," she said. Immediately and to Cassius's surprise, a good deal of the tension in the room drained away, and Cousin Uriah actually exhaled in obvious relief.

"However, I spoke with Grandfather at length, and he has a number of questions which he finds vexing. Let us begin with the most obvious ones. I feel certain that none of you would be so ... presumptuous as to involve yourselves with the shocking events from Azkaban Prison that have captured the nation's attention this week. Or at least, none of you would have done so without at least *consulting* with

us beforehand. However, if any of you have any information you feel might be useful to the Family, please share it now."

At first, there was silence as the assembled family members waited to see who would be the first to stick his neck under the blade. It turned out to be Corban Yaxley, who was not only Lord of his own House but also an official of some importance within the DMLE.

"In the confusion surrounding the Azkaban affair, I was able to filch the incident report on a mysterious fire that broke out in the community of Thurso on the coast of Northern Scotland. Twenty Muggles were killed that night."

"Bah!" said Uriah with a loud belch. "What do we care for burnt Muggles, Yaxley?" Then, the drunken old man noticed Cassilda staring at him. He clamped his mouth shut and began studying the carpets intently.

"I found it significant, Travers," Yaxley said with annoyance, "because Thurso is the only Muggle settlement that lies outside the Ministry's early warning system, which means it's virtually the only place where more than three wizards could enter the country via international portkey simultaneously without it being detected. And *also* because the Azkaban breakout happened *the very next night!*"

Cassilda nodded. "So you suspect that whoever was responsible entered the country via Thurso and then killed all the Muggles who saw their arrival. Well done, Cousin Corban. Please continue your investigation."

Auntie Camilla snickered. "I always said you were my favorite, Little Corby." Corban's smile faltered, and he swallowed at the possible implications of gaining the favoritism of this particular witch.

Amycus Carrow spoke up next as if eager not to be upstaged by Yaxley. "By an interesting coincidence, our sources in Eastern Europe have told us that within the past week, Fenrir Greyback has pulled his entire pack out of Lithuania. Their current location is unknown, but their disappearance coincides with the timing of the events in Thurso that Yaxley just described."

"I find it highly unlikely that either Greyback or any of the Magical werewolves who follow him can produce a mass portkey," said Yaxley with contempt.

"I agree," said Cassilda, "but that might mean that he is acting as a catspaw for someone who *can* produce such a portkey. Cousin Corban, Cousin Amycus, reach out to your spies in the Ministry. Get us a list of British underground portkey artificers who might have the skills and inclination to produce a portkey for Greyback's entire pack. Other than that, Grandfather would like all of you to keep your eyes and ears open for any information, but do not draw any untoward attention to our Family in these tumultuous times."

"Moving on," said Great-Uncle Merihem as he lit up his signature pipe, the one that had been carved with the face of a leering daemoniac imp, "has anyone heard any juicy rumors about the other members of our noble fraternity that might have any bearing on recent events."

Juliana glanced at her husband before speaking up. "It is likely unconnected to these affairs, but I have heard rumors that Tiberius Nott has entered a sealed marriage contract. I have not yet heard who the intended bride is to be, but if the Family thinks it important, I will make further inquiries."

"Please do so," said Cassilda. "That is indeed an interesting rumor, coming on the heels of the remarkable lengths to which Tiberius Nott went in order to mark his younger son as an outcast. Has anyone any thoughts on his motivations for either his upcoming nuptials or his unseemly vengeance against the No-Name boy?"

Uriah barked out a crude laugh. "I think I've got an idea. Mainly because the bastard told me about it after too much fire-whisky last time we went out whoring together. The fool is still trying to get me to forswear myself to the Selwyns and join his alliance. I won't, but I'll still enjoy m'self on his coin."

"The Family is grateful for your continued loyalty, Cousin Uriah."

Uriah snorted. "Like we don't both know the price I'd pay for *disloyalty*, Cousin Cassilda. Anyway -hic- Tiberius thinks that Theo No-Name was never actually his spawn. Thinks his wife and Lucius Malfoy cuckolded him."

"Ah!" exclaimed Auntie Camilla. "And poor old Lucius cannot rescue little Theo No-Name from his awful fate without confirming the cuckoldry and paying a heavy price for it. How charmingly diabolical! I wouldn't have thought Tiberius Nott would have such cunning in him."

Cassilda turned to Alecto Carrow. "See that this rumor is passed via third parties to the Skeeter woman. We will let her investigate and expose Malfoy if the rumor is true ... or, I suppose, if the theory is plausible enough to escape defamation claims. Regardless, the Family will not take an obvious side in any future Malfoy-Nott feud."

Then, her gaze returned to the Yaxleys. "Is the Malfoy heir still on his way to Durmstrang?"

Corban nodded. "He is. I have already instructed Giles and Albert to afford young Draco every courtesy. I have also advised them on how to undermine the boy if it appears he and his father are no long loyal to the fraternity. Given the way dear Narcissa has cut them both off, that seems likely the case."

"Keep us informed." Cassilda thought for a moment. "It is interesting, now that we mention it, that both the Malfoy Heir and the younger Nott should undergo such dramatic life-changing events at the same time." Her gaze scanned across the entire room. "Do they have anything in common?" she said with an almost exaggerated curiosity.

There was silence at first, and then Miranda Bonnevie spoke up.

"Harry Potter," she said with barely disguised bitterness.

"Oh, Cousin Miranda? Do tell us more."

Miranda looked over to the Warringtons for a second and then stood.

"Harry Potter has been a close friend of Theo No-Name almost since their start of school. Potter and Draco Malfoy initially started an antagonistic relationship until Easter Break of 1992, when ... *something* happened. I've never been able to find out what, but the end result was that Harry Potter somehow acquired the loyalty of Draco Malfoy as well as that of both Slytherin prefects and the Quidditch captain in a single night. *No one* knows what he did to achieve that, but it resulted in a significant alteration to Malfoy's own character over the course of the next year, to the point that Draco also developed an extremely close friendship with ... *a Mudblooded Hufflepuff!*"

The rest of the Family began to murmur at that news until a barely audible cough by Merihem caused them all to instantly go silent.

"These are remarkable claims, Cousin Miranda. And refresh my memory. Was it not also this ... *Harry Potter* who played a role in your own unfortunate reversal of fortune?"

Miranda returned Cassilda's gaze levelly and did her best not show fear. "It was," she said.

"Please," Cassilda purred almost seductively. "Tell us more."

Miranda spared the merest glance at her aunt's family before she began. "It began with a plan by Cousin Cassius. As I'm sure you all know, the Boy-Who-Lived was revealed this past year as a Parselmouth. Cassius believed that this was a sign that he was the Heir of Slytherin and had somehow been Sorted incorrectly into Gryffindor. He proposed that we ingratiate ourselves with Jim Potter and introduce him to certain darker magics than he was accustomed, with the goal of seducing him to our ideology. Cousin Cassius asked for my assistance, and I acquiesced."

"And you thought that likely that this scheme would work?" Corban Yaxley said incredulously before ducking his head in response to a casual glance from Cassilda.

"Honestly, no," Miranda said bluntly. "But I did think it possible that we could manipulate him into using potentially illegal curses in some capacity so that we could either engineer his expulsion or further damage his reputation. Failing that, there was always the possibility of blackmail."

Auntie Camilla nodded in seeming approval. "And what went wrong?"



"As I said, Harry Potter. He somehow learned of our scheme and blackmailed Cassius's lackeys, Derrick and Bole, into betraying Cousin Cassius. Who, in turn, betrayed *me*!"

"*That's a LIE!*" Cassius said, jumping to his feet. Instantly, his mother and father each grabbed him by a shoulder and roughly shoved him back into his seat.

"*Be SILENT!*" Antonius hissed furiously at his son through gritted teeth.

Cassilda glanced at the three Warringtons almost diffidently before turning her focus back to Miranda.

"Grandfather was most displeased to hear of your expulsion, Cousin Miranda. We have all invested a great deal of time and effort into both you and the House of Bonnevie. He desires ... an accounting. Are you willing to meet with Grandfather? One-on-one, as it were?"

Miranda swallowed painfully. "If it is Grandfather's desire that I plead my case for myself and also for my family, then of course, I will honored to do so."

Cassius grew even angrier. "*She gets to see Grandfather but not me? No way! She's not going to scapegoat me and get away with it!*"

Before his parents could stop him once more, Cassius Warrington leapt to his feet. "No! The plan was mine. And it would have worked if Miranda hadn't lost her nerve in Dumbledore's office! Let *me* speak to Grandfather! I demand to see him!"

Several people in the room gasped aloud, even as Cassilda Selwyn fixed the impetuous boy with a piercing gaze. Along with a *smile* that was somehow unlike any other smile

Cassius Warrington had ever seen before. Who knew that a pretty lady's smile could be so frightening? And though he could not see them, Auntie Camilla and Great-Uncle Merihem were also grinning in utter delight.

Both Antonius and Juliana moved to rise and apologize for their son's outburst, but Cassilda simply raised her right hand without taking her eyes off the boy. His parents both froze instantly. The Seneshal then held up her left hand in the general direction of Miranda without taking her hypnotic gaze off of young Cassius. She waved her fingers dismissively towards the girl, who took the meaning and swiftly sat down.

"You ... *demand* to see Grandfather?" Cassilda repeated almost deliriously as if she couldn't truly believe what she had heard. Then, she shook her head with what might have passed for pity to anyone who didn't actually know her. "You don't know anything about what's going on, do you Cousin Cassius?"

Before he could reply, she looked back and forth between Antonius and Juliana, like a cat trying to choose which of two captured birds she should play with. "The boy knows *nothing*. You actually brought your fifteen-year-old son to the Abbey of Nightmares for his first visit ... and he knows *nothing* about who we are. About what the House of Selwyn truly is. Astonishing!"

Then, she turned back towards Cassius, who had taken the opportunity to study the faces of his kinsmen. Their expressions ranged from utterly aghast to viciously amused depending on each family member's capacity for empathy.

"Well then, Cousin Cassius," Cassilda said. "If you are so ... *eager* to face Grandfather's judgment, who am I to deny

you?"

"NO!" Juliana shouted as she finally jumped to her feet.

"Cousin Cassilda, the decision to ... to not tell Cassius about ... about how things are... it was made by my husband and I. We are the authors of our son's ignorance. We are the ones responsible for his ... lack of decorum and cunning." Then, Juliana took a deep breath before continuing. "And I, I am Miranda's aunt. It was my desire to bring the House of Bonnevie into harmony with that the House of Selwyn. That makes me responsible for any missteps on Miranda's part. Please! Allow me to be the one to meet Grandfather and plead our case to him."

"Yes," Cassilda said almost dreamily. "I'm quite sure there will be some pleading involved on someone's part. But I am deeply moved by the maternal devotion reflected in your speech." Then, she turned to look at Antonius who was still sitting in his chair utterly speechless.

"And what of you, dear Cousin Antonius. You are Lord Warrington, after all. Will you now take this moment to display your sense of chivalry and heroically demand to take the place of your wife and son?"

Antonius simply stared unblinkingly at the woman, his mouth open and quivering as if he wanted to speak but simply couldn't bring himself to utter the words.

Cassilda laughed softly. "No," she said, her contempt obvious despite her soft tones, "I thought not."

She turned to the rest of the Family. "This meeting is ended. All of you, please consider the matters we have discussed. If you have any information to share, you know how to contact us. If Grandfather has any instructions for you, they will be disseminated by the usual means."

Juliana Warrington turned stiffly to her flummoxed son and kissed him on the forehead before following Cassilda out of the room. Meanwhile, Viola Yaxley invited Miranda Bonnevie to come home with her family for the evening so she could tell the other girl all about Beauxbatons. She promised that she and Miranda would be "such great friends," a prospect that Miranda did her best to view positively. While they were talking, Auntie Camilla waddled over to Hestia and Flora Carrow.

"Well look at you two! You've grown *so much*, haven't you!" The two girls smiled and curtsied.

"Thank you, Auntie Camilla," they said in perfect unison. Amycus and Alecko Carrow stood behind them, beaming like a proud Mother and Father. Or perhaps a proud Aunt and Uncle. Or perhaps even proud older siblings. It was difficult to say.

"Soon, my pretties," Camilla continued. "You'll be at Hogwarts, hehehe!"

"Yes, Auntie Camilla."

"And of course, you'll both be sorted into Slytherin!"

"Of course, Auntie Camilla."

The ancient crone bent down over the young girls. "And you'll keep an eye on this little *Harry Potter* snot and burrow out all of his nasty little secrets, won't you my pretties?"

"Naturally, Auntie Camilla."

Camilla smiled and pinched each of their cheeks. Flora and Hestia smiled up in perfect unison at their Auntie Camilla. A

painfully naive person would have said they looked angelic.

Minutes later, everyone was gone save Cassius and Antonius. The boy was still looking around as if not quite sure what had happened. The father finally rose from his chair and wandered over to the drinks cabinet in search of more scotch.

"Father?" Cassius asked once he'd finally and far too late realized he should be nervous. "What ... what's going on here?"

"Shut up, Cassius," Antonius Warrington said while pouring another drink and without even looking back at his son and heir. "Just ... just *shut up*."

The two sat alone and in silence for nearly two hours before Juliana was returned to them. Hyades and Aldones Selwyn supported the woman by her arms as she was too weak to walk under her own power. Her skin was as white as driven snow, her eyes were glassy and unfocused, and her hair was disarranged. The sleeve of her gown had been ripped away from her right arm, and bandages were wrapped around that forearm from her wrist almost to her elbow. Very thick bandages, thankfully, so only a little bit of blood seeped through.

Antonius and a horrified Cassius took Juliana home to Warrington Manor via Floo and then put her to bed. Immediately, Antonius summoned their family healer who prescribed a regimen of potions for the lady of the house. Over the next two days, Juliana Warrington would consume four Blood-Replenishing Potions, three Draughts of Peace, and two Dreamless Sleep potions. On the third day, she had recovered enough to speak and summoned Cassius and

Antonius to her bed chambers so that Antonius could bind their son to an Unbreakable Vow.

It was only then that Antonius and Juliana told their son the truth about the House of Selwyn.

# **Back to School (pt 1)**

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## **CHAPTER 13: Back to School (pt 1)**

**7 August 1993**

**The Headmaster's Office at Hogwarts**

**9:00 a.m.**

"Cockroach Clusters," Severus Snape said with an affected irritation. When he'd first returned to Hogwarts as a professor, he'd been annoyed by Dumbledore's quirk of basing all his passwords on types of candy. Then, sometime around his second year of teaching, he finally realized that the old man's "quirk" was deliberately chosen for the purpose of reinforcing the perception that he was simply a dotty old man and not one of the most powerful wizards alive. The epiphany surprised Severus at the time, but he quickly decided it would be best to continue being irritated over the matter so that if it ever became an issue, he would have a reservoir of staged memories showing his "contempt for the doddering old fool." Dumbledore invited Snape in before he even could knock, and the Potions Master took his customary chair and declined the customary offer of a sherbet lemon.

"Well now, Severus," Dumbledore said amiably. "You asked to see me first thing this morning to discuss some matter of importance that you were unwilling to discuss over the floo. Which is actually somewhat convenient because I also have a somewhat sensitive matter that I need to discuss with you."

"Oh, Headmaster? What about?"

"Now, now, my boy. You asked for the meeting first, so it's only fair that we discuss your business first."

Snape wrinkled his nose slightly. Honestly, he didn't know how that made things "fair" or what "fairness" even meant in this context. Gryffindor sentimentality, he assumed. Or perhaps the Headmaster thought his own "sensitive matter" was more controversial than Snape's and he believed that granting a request before making one would make Snape more inclined to assist.

"Regrettably, Headmaster, oaths limit me from being too free with background information, but I have a personal request to make, and since I cannot tell you very much about what's going on, I can only hope that I have earned a measure of your trust."

"You have my complete trust, Severus," Dumbledore said earnestly.

Snape nodded his head and suppressed his instinct to sneer at such earnestness. It was never wise to sneer at one's superior, but especially so when you were about to ask him for a favor.

"As you know, I sometimes work during the summers under a pseudonym as a freelance instructor of Occlumency and Legilimency. I have been asked to perform some work related to those two skills during the coming year. I would not normally even consider accepting such employment during the school term but there are ... unusual circumstances. You see, the prospective employer was a suspected Death Eater during the War. And while I cannot at this time provide you with any detailed information, I believe that through this side job, I can gain valuable



information that will be extremely helpful to your own primary agenda."

Dumbledore nodded. His "*primary agenda*" was one of Snape's preferred euphemisms for "*finishing Voldemort for good*."

"How much time off do you need?"

The quick response caught Snape by surprise. He had not expected Dumbledore to acquiesce so easily. "*Obviously, the favor he wants from me is bigger than I'd thought.*"

"Not much," he said aloud. "Roughly one weekend every few months. I had thought that I could schedule this work during Hogsmeade weekends, since the school will be relatively empty."

"I don't foresee a problem with that. I do trust you, Severus. And if you say that this work may be of benefit to us all, you certainly have my permission to accept this opportunity so long as it does not interfere with your official duties here."

With that, the Headmaster paused as he considered how to proceed with his own request. "It is ... interesting that you should raise the issue of trust, Severus. I suppose to be fair I should ask you the same. Do you trust me?"

Snape blinked twice at the question. "I ... am not a trusting person, Headmaster. But I suppose I can say that I trust you as much as I ever have anyone else in this world."

Dumbledore considered that response for a few seconds. Then, he reached into a desk drawer and withdrew a parchment which he handed over to Snape who studied it intently. "Please do make sure not to let anyone else have

access to that. To call it a terrible secret is a gross understatement."

On the parchment was what appeared to be a potions recipe. Snape's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"This is a Damocles Belby potion!" he said in amazement.

"You recognize it?" Dumbledore asked cautiously.

"No, but he did oversee my apprenticeship for nearly three years. I would recognize Master Belby's handwriting nearly as well as my own." He studied the recipe more closely.

"And yet, despite having authored three monographs on the late Master Belby's work, I find that I do not recognize this potion at all, nor have I any idea what it might do." He looked again. "Aside from killing whoever drank it. Fifteen drams of monkshood is enough to poison a horse!"

"It will not be fatal to anyone, Severus. And yes, that potion is indeed an unpublished formula of Damocles Belby's invention. And since your former master passed away five years ago, I can think of no one more qualified to brew it than his most accomplished student."

Snape rolled his eyes at the flattery as the Headmaster continued. "I will require that potion to be brewed at regular intervals for the coming school year. Approximately once per month. As you can see from the instructions, brewing must commence at dawn on the day of the full moon and it takes at least eight hours to complete. I will need the finished potion delivered to me no later than two hours before sunset."

The Potions Master nodded. "But you cannot tell me what this potion is? Or anything about its function or purpose?"

"No, Severus, but I promise you it is not a matter of trust, but rather one of ... plausible deniability. The potion is not illegal per se as no one even knows of its existence save myself and ... and a few others. Nevertheless, there are a great many important people who would be profoundly disturbed if they learned of its existence, even more so if it ever became widely circulated. If it ever becomes an issue, it is my wish that you be able to honestly say that I ordered you to brew it and gave you no knowledge of its nature or purpose. Indeed, you may even wish to say that I forced you to brew the potion and made whatever threats against you that you consider most plausible. I will be happy to help you fabricate any memories you think might be useful."

Snape crooked an eyebrow. "This may well be the strangest conversation you and I have ever had."

Dumbledore laughed softly. "Perhaps."

"So you can truly tell me nothing about," he gestured distractedly towards the recipe, "all this?"

Dumbledore looked down at his desk for several seconds. "I can tell you this much. There are things I have done in the past for which I wish to make amends. This potion will help me to do so, if only in a small way."

Snape was silent for several seconds, and then he sighed in resignation. "Very well. If it is that important to you, I will brew your potion as requested. I only hope you know what you're doing." With that, he rose and left the office.

As soon as the door closed, Dumbledore pulled another parchment from his desk and read over it once more. This one was not a potions formula but rather a letter he'd received the day before, one that had flown halfway around the world to reach him. "So do I, Severus," Dumbledore

muttered to himself as he started writing his response. "So do I."

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**9 August 1993**

**Longbottom Manor, Sirius Black's room**

**11:00 a.m.**

When Harry stepped into Sirius's room, he was surprised to find Regulus already there. The two brothers were back on speaking terms, but things remained tense between them. At the moment, Regulus was standing over Sirius's bed, handing off a succession of wands to the bedridden man who was flicking and swishing each in turn.

"Good morning, Harry!" Sirius said cheerfully, only to frown when his latest wand fizzled impotently. He tossed it onto the floor to Reg's obvious annoyance. The younger man just shook his head and handed over another wand.

"Good morning, Sirius, Regulus. Where did the spare wands come from?"

"My little brother agreed to go on a spot of grave-robbing for me," Sirius replied with a cheeky expression.

Regulus actually sputtered at that to Sirius's amusement. Harry just crooked an eyebrow. "Grave-robbing?"

"Ignore Sirius. He's just being ... himself. The wands of deceased Black family members are kept in a display case in the family vault. So far as we know, Sirius's own wand got snapped upon his conviction, though obviously neither of us are inclined to actually confirm that. So now, we're seeing if he's compatible with any other family wands."

And as soon as he'd said that, the very next wand that Sirius shook gave out an almost jubilant display of purple and blue sparks.

"Eureka!" he shouted.

"What?" the boy asked in confusion.

Sirius grinned over at him. "Eureka. It's Greek for '*my bath water is too hot*,' he joked, which earned him another eye roll from Regulus. "Or perhaps more accurately translated as '*I have found it*.' And it's Uncle Alphard's old wand too! Makes sense. He was about the only member of my wretched family I ever could get along with."

"Pot. Kettle. Black." Regulus muttered as he walked around the bed to Harry. "Anyway, now that Sirius has a functioning wand – which he will no doubt use to engage in idiotic pranks and whatnot – let's get you sorted out."

"I already have a wand," Harry said with some confusion.

"Yes, one you can't use unless you're either at school or in the presence of Mad-Eye Moody. And in light of who we have locked up in Lady Augusta's basement plus your own well-known propensity for attracting trouble, I don't want you to be completely helpless if something unexpectedly awful happens while you're away from Hogwarts." He nodded in the direction of Sirius. "After all, you're not going to be able to charm *every* rabid dog you encounter. And besides, Sirius has some ... house-keeping matters to go over with you so you'll need a wand you can use without setting off the Trace."

And with that, Regulus reached into his jacket pocket and produced a 10-inch wand made of what looked like the purest, darkest ebony.

"Wait a minute," Harry said in confusion. "You mean all you need to get around the Trace is to just get a new wand?"

"Don't be silly. The Trace is put on the wand initially, but when it chooses you, the Trace attaches to you personally so you can't use *any* wand without triggering it. *Except* for this one."

Sirius spoke up from his bed even as he waved Uncle Alphard's wand about to get a feel for it. "You see, Harry, our great-great-great-great-grandfather Licorus Black was on the Wizengamot when the Reasonable Restriction on Underage Sorcery law was passed. He was a strong proponent of the law, mainly because he saw a way to hamstring his rivals' children while giving his own kids a leg up. Right before the law went into effect, he secretly went to Germany and hired the Gregorovichs to custom-craft a wand that could be used by a minor without triggering the Trace, so that Licorus's descendants could freely practice magic at home during the summers. The result was the *Black Wand*, an ebony wand with ... well, honestly, I don't know what the core is, and I'm not sure I want to find out. I do know it cost him an arm and a leg to commission."

"Quite so," said Regulus. "In today's galleons, you could buy Puddlemere United for what this wand cost. And it can't be used by just any minor either. Only someone with Black blood can even hold it safely." He paused and looked suddenly thoughtful. "You *are* 100% certain that you're the son of James Potter, right? No chance that Lily had a bit of fun on the side that James didn't know about?"

"Regulus!" Sirius exclaimed in a scandalized voice.

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, Sirius," Reg said blandly. "You know as well as I how *distinctly unpleasant* it would be

if someone without Black lineage were to even touch the Black Wand."

"It's okay," Harry interrupted before the two Black brothers got into another argument. "I've had a full genealogy work-up from Gringotts. I am definitely the son of James Potter and therefore the grandson of Dorea Black Potter."

"Fair enough." Regulus flipped the Black Wand in the air, caught it, and handed it off butt-first. As soon as Harry took the wand, an angry jet of inky black smoke shot out of the wand and then dissipated. To Harry's surprise, he actually sensed what almost felt like ... *disdain* emanating from the wand, as if it faintly disapproved of him but not enough to refuse his commands.

"Good," said Regulus. "You didn't die horribly."

Harry looked up sharply. "Was that a thing that could have happened?!"

"Probably not," Sirius said. "Most likely it would have blown your hand off or something. Nothing too permanent. And luckily, we even had a *DADA instructor* on hand if anything went wrong."

Regulus grimaced. Already, he regretted letting Lady Augusta tell Sirius about his Lockhart escapades. "Anyway, Harry, just remember. *This wand doesn't leave the Manor*. It is *beyond illegal* for you to have a wand that is immune to the Trace. Getting expelled and having your own wand snapped would probably be the least of your concerns."

Harry nodded solemnly. "I understand." Then, he looked over at Sirius. "So, house-keeping matters?"

Sirius sat up, suddenly full of nervous energy. "Yeah. You see there's something that, well, I was *supposed* to have done back when you turned eleven, but we all know what happened there. Now I still don't fully understand what's been going on between you and James, and I promised you I wouldn't press the matter, at least for the time being. *But* when you were born, I swore an oath to James and Lily that I would serve as your godfather. Traditionally in our culture, when a godchild turns eleven, the godparent renews that vow directly to the child. I, obviously, couldn't do that when I was supposed to, but if you'll permit me, I'd like to do so now."

"Um, what exactly is involved in that?" Harry asked somewhat suspiciously.

"Nothing that can be a negative to you, I should think," Regulus said reassuringly. "It will not give Sirius any power over you, nor will it obligate you in any way to him."

"*But*," Sirius continued, "it does mean that if James can't ... or won't act as your father, I will be honor bound to do so. Furthermore - and I can't believe I'm even suggesting this as a possibility - if James ever does kick you out of House Potter or if you decide to leave on your own, then for as long as I'm alive, you'll be considered an honorary member of House Black and even be able to use that as your surname. If *that* happens - and assuming I can get out of my current legal limbo - I could even adopt you as my son and heir. You know, if you wanted that. Completely your decision that." He barked out a laugh. "Mind you, it would be good to have someone reliable who could take over the family's affairs if something happened to me."

At that, he gave a big stinkeye to Regulus who was unimpressed. "Do as you want, Sirius, it won't bother me. In



case you've forgotten, I'm an independently wealthy best-selling author."

Harry chuckled. "Okay, Sirius. I'm in. And I would be honored to formally accept you as my godfather. Now what do I do?"

"Nothing terribly complicated. Just hold the Black Wand out and let me touch my wand to it." The two crossed their wands, and Sirius began his oath. "I, Sirius Orion Black, Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of Black ..."

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### ***Thirty minutes later ...***

His business with Sirius complete, Harry returned to his room in an unusually good mood. He was still getting to know the mercurial Sirius Black, but the man certainly seemed bent on serving as the father figure Harry had never had before. Granted, Black could still let him down somehow – most grownups had, after all – but it felt good to have someone else in his corner, even if it was an escaped prisoner.

Harry removed the Black Wand from the pocket into which he'd placed it and set it down on his nightstand. He took a few steps away in the direction of his writing desk only to suddenly spin around and thrust his open hand towards the Black Wand.

"**ACCIO WAND!**" he exclaimed. The Black Wand didn't even twitch and seemed as immune to the boy's attempt to wandlessly summon it as his regular holly and phoenix feather wand had been so far. Harry made a sour face and turned back to the writing desk to start his homework for the day. Moody had given him a rather long list of exotic spells to review, after all.

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### ***Meanwhile at 12 Grimmauld Place ...***

With a soft pop, Dobby arrived in the entry hall to 12 Grimmauld Place. He sniffed delicately and then grinned in delight. There would be *a lot* to clean here. Softly, he padded down the hallway. As he neared the painting of Walburga Black, the insane old witch started screaming behind her curtain. Dobby silenced her with a snap of his fingers. He would not be able to do so as easily when Master Harry and the other wizards came here, but for the moment, he would enjoy the quiet. There was another pop from a room nearby. Dobby moved to investigate and found another house elf waiting for him.

*"Ah yes," he thought. "This must be poor Kreacher. The elf driven mad by his owners. Dobby can sympathize."*

"Dobby, house elf to the Great Wizard Harry Potter, bids you good morning," Dobby said cheerfully. "Dobby assumes you are the one called Kreacher."

"Not *the one called Kreacher!*" the other elf snarled. "Kreacher IS Kreacher!"

Dobby shrugged diffidently. He rather doubted that was entirely the case, but he was not here to heal the broken servant of House Black, only to assist him in cleaning up 12 Grimmauld Place. Master Harry's friend Neville would be returning to Longbottom Manor before too long. And while it was agreed that the captured Death Eaters could sit and rot in the Longbottom dungeons (which Neville didn't even know about), Sirius and Regulus would need to relocate, and their family home was the only plausible option. Unfortunately, it lacked dungeons for holding the Death Eaters, who would have to remain behind. It was a source

of great amusement to Sirius that the fine upstanding Longbottoms had an actual dungeon in their basement but the dark sinister Blacks did not.

"To be honest, Dobby does not actually care. My master and his dogfather have commanded Dobby to come here and help with cleaning up this dwelling. Or if necessary, to undertake the cleaning by Dobby's own self if Kreacher is not up to the task."

Kreacher gave out a low hiss. "The House of Black is Kreacher's to maintain."

Dobby looked around the filthy, cobweb-infested room. "Obviously."

"Grrr. Kreacher will not clean up this house so that it can be defiled by filthy, stinking, unclean blood traitors. Kreacher is loyal to the true House of Black. Let the blood traitors come. Kreacher will end them in their sleep."

Dobby was silent for a moment and then spoke in a soft but precise voice. "Dobby sincerely hopes that was not intended as a threat from the Kreacher elf towards Master Harry and his dogfather. If it was, Dobby might obliged to respond in kind. The Kreacher elf is not the first elf to have threatened the Great and Wonderful Wizard Harry Potter in Dobby's presence. Dobby knew another elf not long ago who also wished Master Harry harm."

He took a step towards Kreacher and narrowed his eyes. "Dobby broke that elf, left him undone, and sent him back to The Other Place. Nothing was left behind but leaves and twigs. Will the Kreacher Elf learn from Dobby's counsel? Because Dobby suspects that his master would be quite relieved to never see or hear from Kreacher again. It is a

terrible thing to return to The Other Place when it not yet time. The point loss alone ..."

"Bah!" Kreacher exclaimed dismissively, but it was clear that Dobby's words troubled him. After a moment, he made a nasty face but then nodded in submission. "Kreacher will not harm the filthy Halfbloods and blood traitors, nor even condemn them. Kreacher will remain out of sight. And perhaps stay drunk on butterbeer until the Dark Lord comes and kills the Halfbloods and blood traitors."

"Well, that will do, Dobby supposes. Now, if the Kreacher Elf will excuse Dobby, there is much cleaning to be done."

Kreacher hissed again, and then apparated away. Dobby clucked his tongue and then started looking around for a mop and bucket.

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## **10 August 1993**

### **Three Broomsticks Inn and Pub, Room 3, Hogsmeade Inside Mad-Eye Moody's Trunk**

Harry moved cautiously down the ladder into the trunk as he pondered Alastor Moody's instructions. When he arrived at Moody's rooms for his regular tutoring session, the former auror cast the spell that authorized his young charge to legally use his wand for the next few hours. Then, Moody descended into his labyrinthine trunk after telling Harry to count to thirty before following. He also said that he would not target Harry with any spells until after the boy had cast his first one. During his silent countdown, Harry considered what he knew and what he'd been directed to study and concluded that Moody would be laying traps and altering the environment inside the trunk to his advantage.

That wouldn't violate his promise to refrain from targeting Harry directly.

Harry's suspicions were confirmed when he made it to the bottom of the ladder. The level of the trunk that Moody had prepared for him was filled with a thick impenetrable fog, almost certainly the product of the Fumos Charm. The spell created a smokescreen that the caster could see through easily but which would completely obscure the vision of anyone else in the area of effect. Harry could dispel it with a Ventus Maximus or an overpowered Finite Incantatem, but doing so would count as his first spell and would leave him wide open to attack before the mist cleared enough to spot his opponent. Slowly, Harry crept forward, listening intently for any sounds that might give a way Moody's location. From experience, he knew the room he was now in to be a large open training area with plenty of room to move around in even if he couldn't see his hand in front of his face. He also knew because of how Fumos worked that while he couldn't see Moody, the man himself could see Harry clearly.

Then, from somewhere about twenty feet away and to his left, Harry heard a soft creak from the floor. He decided to make his move. "**FUMOS MAXIMUS!**" he cried out before dropping and rolling out of the way just as an Expelliarmus passed through the area where he'd been standing. He continued to roll, dodging spellfire the whole way as his own magical fog filled the room. If he was right about the nature of Fumos, there would now be two overlapping smokescreens in place. He couldn't see through Moody's, and Moody couldn't see through his. The odds would be even.

*"Unless that damned eye of his can see through my fog,"* Harry thought bitterly. But after a second, the spellfire

stopped, which indicated that Moody's eye couldn't pierce Harry's own Fumos. Still on the ground, Harry whispered the incantation for the Muffliato Charm that Hermione had gotten from Snape. From the far side of the room, he heard Moody cast another Disarming Jinx in his general direction, but it went wide. If Harry's understanding of Muffliato was correct, Moody's efforts to listen for him would ensure that he would only hear a buzzing sound from an indeterminate direction. Hopefully, the ex-auror was now effectively deaf as well as blind. Slowly, Harry rose to his feet. No spells came his way but he could just barely make out the sounds of movement somewhere on the far side of the room.

Harry smiled as an idea came to him. "*If it worked against a Voldemort-possessed Ron, maybe it will work just as well here.*" He reached into his pocket and pulled out a galleon and tossed it towards the far side of the room. It clattered on the floor and a split second later, an Expelliarmus shot out in that direction. The flash of light was barely visible through the fog, but it was enough to give away Moody's position.

"**AVIS OPPUGNO!**" Instantly, a flock of birds blasted out of Harry's wand and flew towards Moody. The instant the birds left the protection of Harry's Muffliato, their squawks alerted Moody who quickly cast a Vestimentarum shield around himself. Suddenly, the area around the man was lit up by blue electrical sparks as the conjured birds impacted against the shield Harry had learned the year before in "Lockhart's" first class. "**EXPELLIARMUS!**" cried the boy, his arm pointed at the heart of the electrical light show.

Unfortunately, before he could complete the Disarming Jinx, there was a soft pop from the area under assault by the birds, followed by a second pop a millisecond later right behind the boy. Harry turned as fast as he could, but it

wasn't fast enough. Moody's own wordless Disarming Jinx hit him before he could identify the man's location, and his wand flew from his hand. Seconds later, Moody's Finite had cleared the room of both fog banks and the flock of angry birds, leaving nothing but a dejected boy and his tutor.

"Right!" Moody said. "Critique time. Why didn't you use the Supersensory Charm?"

"Because it wouldn't have let me spot you before you took me down," Harry grumbled as he took back his wand. "Also, if you'd realized I had the Supersensory Charm up, you could have just shot off some fireworks and deafened me."

The ex-auror nodded. "Exactly right. I was waiting for that and you never fell for it. Well, that's it for the critique."

Harry did a double-take. "Um, it is? Only *one* negative comment?"

"Yep. Well done, laddy!" Moody exclaimed jovially. "Very well done, indeed!"

"It didn't feel very well done, sir, since I lost for about the thirtieth time," Harry said.

"Aw don't be such a sourpuss. You kept your head and used the spells you knew creatively and innovatively. You had a good plan and you executed it, a plan that was as good or better than most of the auror trainees demonstrated when I used to put them through this same exercise. It's not your fault that I had an insurmountable advantage."

Harry thought about that for a second and then groaned. "Your eye *can* see through Fumos. You could see me clearly the whole time."

"Yep."

"In other words, I never actually had a chance at all."

"Not really. There are upper level glamours and illusions that can fool my eye, but you probably won't be exposed to them until 6th year. Or perhaps sooner. You've already got a pretty decent doppelganger spell. Maybe some independent research into illusions is in order. The point of today's exercise, however, is to fairly evaluate your progress, and that's hardly something I could do if I couldn't even see you."

The boy nodded but then looked pensive. "Mr. Moody, based on what you've seen of my work so far ... do you think I could possibly pass my OWLs early? As in, next summer? Not with any O's obviously, but at least Acceptables?"

"And why in Merlin's name would you want to take your OWLs ... Oh, wait, never mind. You're looking to get emancipated?" Moody frowned almost angrily. "Are things that bad with you and your old man?"

"No, no," Harry said shaking his head. "To be honest, things are better than I ever thought they'd be a year ago. But, well, you never know what the future holds. Constant vigilance, and all that."

Moody snorted. "You really lose the effect if you don't bellow that out at the top of your lungs. And if you're serious about sitting your OWLs early, then yes, I think it's definitely possible. I'd be willing to work with you over the school year if you want."

"When? And how?" Harry asked in surprise.



"Hogsmeade weekends, of course. Come on, I'll take you on a tour of the village. As you'll see for yourself, once you've had Madam Rosmerta's shepherd's pie and eaten your fill of Honeydukes candy, the village quickly loses its charms, at least until you're older and can actually go on dates and such. When you come to the village this term, take care of your business early, and I'll work in a three-to-five hour tutoring session that will be specifically geared to your OWLs."

Harry grinned excitedly. He was still grinning when he and his tutor climbed out of trunk and headed down into the common room of the Three Broomsticks. His smile faded into a far less happy expression, however, as he and Moody headed out onto the streets of Hogsmeade while trying diligently to ignore the legion of Dementors that floated in eerie silence above the Forbidden Forest barely a mile away.

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***11 August 1993***  
***from the Daily Prophet Society Page***

*As faithful readers of this page know, a minor scandal erupted when Tiberius Nott of the Noble and Ancient House of Nott, using an obscure and nearly forgotten ritual, banished his son Theodore from the House of Nott and took away his very name. There has been much speculation about what Theo No-Name might have done to warrant such a punishment, but one possibility that has risen its nasty head is that the outcast might have been cast out for never having been a Nott at all! Interestingly, it seems that the eviction of the boy in question roughly coincides with another remarkable scandal – the unprecedented divorce by Narcissa Black-Malfoy of her husband, Wizengamot leader Lucius Malfoy. Rumors*

*abound that before entering into marriage with the youngest daughter of House Black, the future Lord Malfoy had been living sinfully in Paris with a young woman by the name of Christina Fenwick. The same Christina Fenwick who entered into an arranged marriage with Lord Nott barely two months after Lucius Malfoy's own marriage to Narcissa Black following a whirlwind courtship. Indeed, the same Christina Fenwick who was the mother of Lord Nott's two children, the younger of whom is the outcast Theo No-Name!*

*Connections, connections, connections. What can it all mean? This reporter doesn't like to speculate or offer innuendo. We here at the Daily Prophet just present the facts and let our readers decide for themselves.*

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## ***Malfoy Manor***

### ***9:00 a.m***

Lucius folded the paper and set it to one side, a look of smoldering anger marring his patrician features. He toyed with the idea of arranging the Skeeter witch's death but then squashed it. Aside from the pettiness such a move would demonstrate, it wouldn't even solve the real problem. Rita Skeeter would never have printed something as salacious as that and which implicated both Tiberius Nott and himself unless she'd been put up to it by some other more powerful faction. He would investigate first and then revenge himself on the appropriate party.

As he considered his options, Lucius was distracted by Draco entering the room for breakfast. With Narcissa out of the house, Lucius had dispensed with the thirty-foot-long dining table, and breakfast was usually had in the sunroom.

"Good morning, father," Draco said as he sat down to eat.

"Good morning, Draco," Lucius said after a brief pause of indecision. "Before you start your breakfast ... we need to talk."

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**12 August 1993**

**1:00 pm (GMT)**

**Part of a three-way conference call connecting  
London, Cardiff, and Hamburg**

It was a lazy Friday afternoon, and the three Hogwarts students each sat in their respective bedrooms. In London (Chiswick, to be precise), Kevin Entwhistle was making his way through a particularly challenging level of *Legend of Zelda* on his Game Boy, his wand safely stored away so that no ambient magic might damage the device. In Cardiff, Sue Li was sitting on her bed painting her toenails black while listening to Robert Smith on her radio reassure her that if it was Friday, he was in love. And in Hamburg, Germany, Anthony Goldstein was reviewing passages from a religious text and making personal notes, a kippah in Ravenclaw colors perched on his head.

Luckily, the distance between the three and their competing activities did not prevent them from talking freely, for they had the benefit of three-way international calling with speakerphones, a mode of communication that would have baffled the majority of Pureblood wizards who couldn't have even recognized a phone let alone known how to use one.

"Seriously, Ant," said Kevin as he tried to maneuver Link past another danger. "I still don't even see why you want me involved in your little project. You know I don't have the grades you guys do."

"Your grades are perfectly solid, Kevin," Anthony replied. "And as a Muggleborn, you're more grounded in Muggle technology than the typical Hogwarts student, even Halfbloods like Sue and me."

"Speak for yourself, Anthony," Sue said irritably as she tried not to spill her nail polish on her bed. "*I've* been spending the summer learning to code."

Anthony scoffed. "Well, I'm sure that will be very helpful when you try to use magic around your computer and it melts. How far have you gotten?"

Sue sighed. "Not very. It's been a busy summer. In addition to witchcraft and computer programming, I'm considering becoming a Goth chick."

"Are you now," said Kevin with some amusement. "A Chinese-British computer geek Goth witch? Isn't that a bit much?"

"Oh shut up, Entwhistle. You're just jealous that you don't have anyone who speaks to you the way Trent Reznor does to me."

"Hey, I'm distantly related to the bassist for The Who. Does that count?"

There was a brief shocked pause from the other two. "Are you really?!" Anthony said in amazement.

"Yeah. Well, I think so. I'm from his hometown and we're both named Entwhistle. My dad says we're like third cousins or something. Anyway, that's my story and I'm sticking to it. But we've drifted from the topic, which is 'why do you want me to join your *experimental research group*?' Didn't you Claws get enough of that with Lockhart last year

while I was out running laps around the castle at the bloody crack of dawn?"

"Honestly, Kevin," said Anthony. "We want you because you can bring a purely Muggle perspective to our work, while Sue and I were both raised in a mixed Muggle-Wizarding background. And also, you're a Puff, and you can keep us flighty and eccentric Ravenclaws grounded when we get too far out there."

Kevin snorted. "So why don't you just get Justin?"

"Mmm. I dunno about Justin," Sue Li said doubtfully. "He's been hanging with a bad crowd."

"Oh come on, Sue," Anthony said irritably. "That 'bad crowd' consists of exactly one Slytherin who actually started acting nicer while under Justin's influence. Well, he *was* acting nicer but his father is sending him off to Durmstrang, so he'll probably come back as some kind of magical skinhead."

Kevin sniggered despite himself at the thought of Draco Malfoy with a shaved head and tattoos and dressed like a football hooligan. "Um-hmm. So what about Harry Potter or Hermione Granger? He's Muggle-raised and she's Muggleborn and they're both at the top of our class."

Anthony flipped a page as he spoke. "Harry says he's interested in helping but has a very heavy academic year ahead of him, though he was cagey about what extra work he's doing. Hermione, on the other hand, was very open about the fact that she's basically taking *all* the electives, plus she's starting a club of her own."

"*All* the electives?" Kevin exclaimed. "Can you even do that? You know, without using time travel? ... Actually, *can* you

time travel with magic?"

"No," Sue said with authority. "Time travel is impossible due to the Fifth Principle Exception to Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration."

Kevin rolled his eyes. "... Of course it is. Have I mentioned how outclassed I feel academically with you two Claws?"

"Repeatedly," said Anthony. "And you shouldn't be. Sue's dad is a Transfiguration master, so she's ahead of us all in that area. Anyway, Granger just has a very complicated schedule with no breaks or free periods for the whole year. Honestly, I'm afraid she'll have a breakdown before Christmas."

Kevin spat out a curse as poor Link died once again. "Nah. She'll handle it, or else her friends will stage an intervention and get her to drop some classes. I mean, we can literally take an elective the whole year and drop it without penalty any time before the final, right?"

"So long as you take exams in at least two electives, yes. By the way, Anthony, what's this club she wants to start?"

"I'm not entirely sure, Sue, but it's something to do with protesting against abuses of mind control magic. I think she's upset about what happened to that Theo No-Name kid."

"I don't blame her!" Kevin exclaimed somewhat angrily. "Bad enough this one particular kid is getting screwed over by his own dad, but why is it no one else is up in arms about how magic can be used to brainwash half the country?"

"I hear you," said Sue. "I nearly got into an argument over it with Cho Chang. She didn't even know this Theo kid's

name, and now she's ready to believe all sorts of rumors about how awful he is. Everyone I know whose family has any sort of Ministry or Wizengamot connection is like that. It's kinda creepy actually."

Kevin paused to think for a moment. "You know, if opposition to this Sanction thing is going to be mainly a Muggleborn or Muggle-raised thing anyway, it seems to me there should be some overlap between Granger's group and what you guys want to accomplish. Why don't we just join her group and then get her to help you with your experiments as a condition to staying in?"

"That's very cunning, Kevin!" Sue said mischievously. "Are you sure you're not a Slytherin in disguise?"

Kevin snorted as if affronted. "Hufflepuffs can be cunning when we need to be, Sue. We're just not prats about it. Anyway, we can talk about this more at school. What do you guys have planned from now until the 1st?"

"Enjoying black fingernails and eyeliner and functioning CD players while I still can," said Sue.

"Homework," said Anthony rather grumpily.

Kevin laughed. "The Ravenclaw hasn't finished his homework yet? You're slacking off, Ant!"

"Different homework, actually. I have to read from the Torah this Saturday as part of my bar mitzvah. And in front of all four of my grandparents plus a whole synagogue of Jewish Muggles. I'm more nervous about it than I ever was about answering Snape's questions in Potions class."

"You're having your bar mitzvah!" Sue said excitedly. "That's so cool! The Brit-Chinese community doesn't

do *anything* like that, Magical or Muggle. I mean, maybe a Sweet Sixteen, but that's another three years from now."

"Honestly, I don't know much about what a bar mitzvah is beyond what I've seen on TV," said Kevin. "I'm Anglican, which in my family means we go to services on Christmas morning and my grandad stands and salutes during the Queen's speech, but that's it. Actually, I never even realized you were Jewish. I've never seen you wear, um, that hat thing."

"Kippah. Or yarmulke, depending on who you're talking to. And my family is Reform Jewish, so I only wear it when I'm praying, reading the Torah, or actually in a synagogue. I almost never wore it at Hogwarts." He paused and frowned. "Actually to be precise, I'm *Magical* Reform Jewish, which makes things even more complicated."

"Still, I know bar mitzvah a big deal for you, so congratulations!"

"Thanks ... I guess. My parents have never been terribly observant, but the bar mitzvah is important to my grandparents, and I want to make them happy, so ..." He trailed off but then changed the subject..

"Any way, when we get on the Hogwarts Express, find our cabin. Nana Goldberg is making a truly ridiculous amount of food for my bar mitzvah party, which none of my school friends will be coming to because it'll be in *Hamburg*." Anthony practically groaned at that. He'd hated his parents move to Germany and missed Britain terribly during the summers. "But on the bright side, I'll be bringing plenty of leftovers."

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**14 August 1993**  
**A fishing boat on Lake Jindabyne**  
**New South Wales, Australia**

"COME ON YOU BLOODY BASTARD!" yelled Buck MacMillan as he struggled against the massive trout that was on the other end of his fishing line. For a brief instant, he thought about simply pulling out his wand and summoning the blasted thing, but no, that would be cheating. Finally, with a roar and one final pull, the trout flew out of the lake and landed on Buck's boat. The retired auror was delighted – the thing must have weighed at least twenty-five pounds.

But then, Buck's delight was replaced by a twitch of recognition at the sound of something moving fast towards his location. He whirled around, his wand instantly appearing in his hand and pointed at the figure flying towards him on a broom. The rider slowed on approach though, and when Buck could make out the traditional auror's robe, he lowered the wand but did not put it away. Seconds later, Senior Auror Nguyen Park landed competently if not exactly gracefully on the fishing boat.

"Auror Nguyen! This is a surprise. And here I thought you hated brooms."

"I do, but I wasn't about to apparate to a boat in the middle of a great big lake. The sheer embarrassment if I'd been off by even a few feet would have been the end of me." She stepped forward and gave her friend and former mentor a hug. "And I think you're allowed to call me Park now that you're off the force."

Buck laughed and returned the friendly hug. "Pshaw. I called you Park when I was *on* the force. You know I was

never one for formalities. Speaking of which, you want a beer?"

"No thanks."

"Suit yourself," he replied as he walked over to a metal chest upon which a permanent cooling charm had been cast and removed a can for himself. "So what brings you out here to interrupt my fishing vacation."

"You're retired, Buck. You've even sold the bar. Every day is a vacation for you." Nguyen paused and looked away for a second. "I need a favor, and I think you're the person for it."

"What sort of favor?"

"The British DMLE has asked us to send someone over their to act as an advisor on some law enforcement-related matters. We don't really have anyone to spare at the moment, so I thought of you."

"Did you now?" Buck asked suspiciously. "And why did I pop to the top of your list?"

"Frankly, Buck," she answered somewhat cautiously, "I think you might have a bit of a personal interest. Do you remember that British author who wrote that book about the Wagga Wagga incident? The one that got most of the facts wrong and painted him to be a big hero?"

Buck took a long swig of Foster's. "I seem to recall him."

"Well, his name's Gilderoy Lockhart. And *apparently*, a few months ago, he confessed to a bunch of crimes and then used the Tabula Rasa to lobotomize himself. Or so the Brits believe. They want someone to come over and confirm

whether it was really Tabula Rasa and advise them on whether it's reversible or not."

"You and I both know that Tabula Rasa is irreversible."

"Yes, Buck. That's why it's a capital offense to use it without official sanction." Buck didn't respond, and Nguyen started to get angry. "Dammit, Buck! Fine. Let's stop beating around the bush. We both know that I covered for you and Rusty back in 1985. And I'm *still* covering for you both. That's why I recommended you for this assignment when the order came down from the Chief. But if you won't go, the Chief will send someone else. And *who knows* what sorts of rocks that someone is going to kick over!"

Buck grimaced but finally nodded his head. "Alright. Tell the Chief I'll go. I need a few days to get my affairs in order here since I don't know how long I'll be gone, but tell him I'll owl him about international portkey arrangements as soon as possible."

Nguyen exhaled. "Good. Thanks, Buck." Without another word, she mounted her broom and took off. Once she was a half-mile away, there was a loud crack as she apparated away. Buck finished his beer in solitude.

"*Dammit Rusty,*" he thought ruefully. "*What the hell kind of mess have you gotten into now?*"

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**14 August 1993**  
**Longbottom Manor**  
**9:00 p.m.**

Harry stared down at the Marauders' Map cautiously. It was an amazing piece of magic, one that still showed the movements of people in the castle even though Longbottom

Manor was hundreds of miles away. But that wasn't the most remarkable of its enchantments, for the Map contained not one but four artificial personalities based upon the Marauders themselves, all apparently frozen in memory and emotional development at some point around their Fifth Year. And after several weeks of discussion, the Marauders finally agreed that it would be possible for Harry to psychically enter the Map and talk directly with those artificial personalities and even to relive some of their memories. He was a little skittish about the idea, particularly since Jim had told him that Tom Riddle had nearly trapped his mind inside the Diary through a similar process. Still, this would be his best opportunity to learn more about the Marauders and especially his own father. At this point, Harry figured that if he would ever learn the source of James Potter's irrational hatred and fear of Harry being a Slytherin, this might be the best way to do it.

"Okay, guys," he said to the Map. "I'm ready. Let's do it."

**"Messrs Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs are all eager to start as well.**

**We'll see you on the other side.**

**Well, one of us at least."**

Harry frowned at that last cryptic remark, but before he could respond, there was a glowing light that sprang forth from the Map that engulfed his face and body. He had a sudden sensation of falling forward into a deep hole, but it soon passed. Harry shook his head and looked around. He was in what seemed to be a Hogwarts common room, Gryffindor's if the crimson wallpaper with a lion motif were any indication. The boy looked around for the four young Marauders, but he was surprised and a bit concerned to see only one. Specifically, the only one that he really didn't

want to be alone with while stuck in an enchanted map of dubious provenance.

"Wotcher, Harry Potter!" exclaimed a portly fifteen-year-old boy in Gryffindor robes and bearing an unfortunate mullet. "Peter Pettigrew's the name! Glad to meet you!"

Harry swallowed and then put on his best fake smile.

## Chapter End Notes

AN1. Lots of comments after last chapter on FF.Net theorizing that the Selwyns (or Grandfather, at least) are vampires. I will offer two spoilers. (1) Grandfather Selwyn is a vampire. (2) The fact that Grandfather Selwyn is a vampire is not remotely the most disturbing thing about the House of Selwyn. :)

# Back to School pt 2

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### CHAPTER 14: Back to School (pt 2)

**14 August 1993**

**9:00 p.m.**

#### **Inside the Marauder's Map**

*"Hullo there, Harry Potter!" exclaimed a young portly fellow in Gryffindor robes and bearing an unfortunate mullet. "Peter Pettigrew's the name! And I'm so looking forward to us being the best of friends."*

*Harry swallowed and then put on his best fake smile.*

"Hello ... Uncle Pete," Harry said with as much cheerfulness as he could muster. Pettigrew grinned broadly.

"*Uncle Pete!*" he exclaimed. "I like that. I'm glad to see that I'm still a part of James's life so many years after graduation."

"Well of course you are," Harry replied easily. "Though I'm a bit surprised to see just you here and not the other three."

"Yeah, about that." Peter rubbed the back of his neck in what seemed to be genuine embarrassment. To Harry's surprise, he sensed none of the oily manipulative nature that the real Pettigrew radiated. This psychic impression of the younger Pettigrew actually seemed bashful and sincere, so far at least.

"We talked it over," he continued. "Well, for what passes for '*talking things over*' when you're copies of four people stuck in a Map. But one of those copies is based on Remus Lupin who is the brains behind this operation, and he is of the opinion that it's too dangerous for all four of us to interact with you like this at the same time. Says it might overload the map's "*mnemonic architecture*," whatever the heck that means. You see the Map updates us with new memories every time one of the Real Us activates or deactivates it. James was the last person to do so before it was confiscated sometime after Halloween of our Sixth Year. Sirius was the one before him and then Remus. My personality hasn't been updated since early in our Fifth Year, so interacting with me will require slightly less magic than the others and might be a bit safer."

"Okay," Harry said uncertainly. "I don't understand that very well, but if that's what ... Uncle Remus said, I'll go along with it."

Peter smirked but not maliciously. "Just between us, there's another reason they sent me in first."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," he said with a chuckle. "Of the four of us, apparently I'm the only one without any dark, dirty secrets that I'm afraid to share."

Despite himself, Harry did a double-take. "Is that a fact?"

Peter nodded. "James is your dad. Sirius is your godfather. Neither one of them knows what sort of men they'll grow up to be in the future, and they're very worried that their grown-up selves would be embarrassed by how their Map personalities portray them. As for Remus, well, I don't know if you know, but he has ... a situation. And he's worried that

you don't know about his ... situation and that finding out from us might embarrass his older self. Or possibly cause something worse than embarrassment." He paused. "So do you? Know about his ... you know?"

"I know he has an undisclosed medical condition. That's it really."

"Fair enough. I'll let the others know not to discuss that with you until after your Dad or one of us out in the real world has told you the truth."

Harry nodded. "I have to say ... Uncle Pete. You're ... not what I was expecting."

"Oh? How so?" Then, Pettigrew started. "Wait! Don't answer that! Remus also said that as much as possible you should avoid telling us anything about what happens after our last resets. He thought it might be damaging. Again, better safe than sorry."

"Noted."

Peter looked at him quizzically. "No offense, sport, but you seem ... sharper than James. Lily's influence?"

"I thought you didn't want me to say anything about the future."

"About *our* futures. Talking about *your* life is fine so long as you don't give us any big surprises. You've already spilled the beans that James and Lily *finally* hook up and that James becomes Chief Auror, both of which caused Map-James to go all funny for a while, but he's better now. But try to avoid major plot developments forward." With that, Pettigrew moved over to an easy chair in front of a big fireplace in the Map's rendition of the Gryffindor Common



Room. He gestured for Harry to take the seat across from him.

"Butterbeer?" he inquired before snapping his fingers. Instantly, two icy cold butterbeers appeared on the little table separating the two chairs.

Harry looked at the beverage suspiciously. "How is it possible for me to drink in here?"

"Technically, you won't be drinking it. You'll just be reliving my memory of the best butterbeer I ever had."

Cautiously, Harry took a sip, and to his surprise, it not only tasted like butterbeer but noticeably better and more refreshing than prior butterbeers he'd had. Peter smirked at him.

"So, can I ask you a question, Harry? I promise I'll keep it in confidence and not share the answer with the other Marauders."

"Guess it depends on the question ... Uncle Pete."

The other boy chuckled. "Okay then. Just between you and me ... *are you* a Slytherin?"

Harry laughed out loud to disguise his momentary surprise over the question. "That was just a joke, Uncle Pete."

Peter shook his head. "I compliment you on your mask, Harry. But that was the wrong answer. If you were really James's Gryffindor son, you'd have been angry at the suggestion, and anyway, it's obvious from your reactions so far that the Gryffindor Common Room is not a familiar location for you. If you were a Hufflepuff, you'd be too honest to consider hiding your Sorting. If you were a

Ravenclaw, you'd have proudly announced it, claiming that it was all Lily's influence. Only a Slytherin would have been evasive about his Sorting the way you've been."

He put up a hand to reassure the boy.

"And I meant what I said, Harry. None of the others will hear about your Sorting from me. And to be honest, I'd be cautious about them hearing of it from *you*. While I certainly hope that James and Sirius have grown out of their attitudes about Slytherin House, their fifteen-year-old versions definitely have not. It's remarkable in a way, because the two great obsessions of James Charlus Potter are Lily Evans and pranking Slytherins. And if he could just let go of the latter, he'd have the former in a heartbeat."

Harry nodded. "And Remus?"

"Normally, I'd say he's safe to talk to about it, but at the time of his last reset, he was in a bit of a crush phase towards Sirius so he might blab."

"Crush ... phase?"

"I don't mean sexual, though Sirius is the first one of us to lose his virginity, a fact that he still brags about endlessly. But everyone who interacts with Sirius eventually develops some sort of crush on him. *Everyone*."

"Even you?"

"Yeah, but luckily for me, it was when we were Second Years so I worked through it early. Now, I get to sit back and watch in amusement as other people go through the phase of getting dewey-eyed and compliant whenever Sirius grins at them and compliments their appearance and then asks for a 'little favor.' It's rather amusing once you're

not the one affected by it. I wondered once if it was a magical gift, but now, I just think it's plain old charm but to the nth degree."

Harry took a sip of butterbeer. "You're very perceptive, aren't you."

Pettigrew shrugged. "That's what I bring to the group. James and Sirius are both rich, good-looking, and popular. Remus is brilliant and well-liked – which, by the way, is *not* the same thing as popular. And I ... notice things."

"Like what."

Pettigrew grew pensive. "Like the fact that when you first showed up here, you were visibly disturbed to see me. You covered it up fast, which was another thing that made me think you couldn't possibly be a Gryffindor. But I saw it. And it wasn't just disappointment that your father and godfather weren't here to greet you. You were unhappy to see *me*. Almost alarmed, in fact."

Harry took a big swig of butterbeer to give himself time to think. To his surprise, Pettigrew – even *this* version of Pettigrew – was incredibly observant. Harry had not been actively occluding when he entered the Map because he hadn't thought it necessary, but his passive Occlumency should have allowed him to ingratiate himself to Map-Peter with ease. And yet this copy of Pettigrew, one mentally only a few years older than himself, had seen through him instantly.

"It's not something I can talk about without getting into what's happening in your future. But I can tell you in perfect honesty that as of my Third Year, you're probably closer to my father than either Sirius or Remus."

Peter smiled at that and looked visibly relieved. "Thank you, Harry. That really means a lot to me. Honestly, I've been afraid for some time that James and Sirius would drop me as soon as we graduated. I'm please to find out I'd misjudged them."

"Why would you think that?" Harry said, desperate to change the subject.

Peter shrugged. "We're friends at school, but I don't exactly travel in their social circles. There's no Ancient and Noble House of Pettigrew. My family came to Britain from Norway in the 1940's, refugees from the Grindelwald War. My father died when I was three. I was raised by my mother who ... well, let's just say she had some health issues."

"What kind of health issues?" the boy asked cautiously.

Peter looked away. "Mental health," he finally said. "It's not important. Just something I had to ... to grow up with. But my point is that I know after graduation I won't have much connection with Prongs and Padfoot." He paused. "Do you know those names? What they mean?" he asked suddenly, as if afraid he'd revealed a secret.

"I know the names and I have some idea about the significance. We don't have to go any further than that."

Pettigrew relaxed. "Good, good. Anyway, I don't want you or anyone to feel sorry for me. Mother and I weren't wealthy, but it's not like we were living in some hovel in Knockturn Alley. We had a respectable two-story townhouse in Upper Appleby and lived off of a small amount of gold that my father left us. Mother couldn't work due to her ... Anyway, we lived okay."

"Still, it must have gotten old being friend with James and Sirius given how much money they could flash around."

The other boy smiled wanly. "At times. I tried not to let it get to me though."

"So how did you end up friends, anyway?"

Peter shrugged. "I don't really know if we were friends at the start. To be honest, I was more like their minion at first, always eager to suck up to them because I was afraid I might get bullied by them if I didn't. Luckily, I had a teacher in Second Year who gave me a good swift kick in the pants. My grades got better and I started to gain confidence. By the end of that year, I was an equal member of the group. It's October of Fifth Year for me now, and as of the end of last year, my grades are actually better than James and Sirius, though they're still ahead of me on the practicals. I'm not ashamed to admit that when it comes to magic, all three of the others top me. Moony's a genius, Prongs is a Transfiguration prodigy, and Padfoot ... well, I don't now how he does it, but I'm convinced he's cheating by practicing during the summers somehow without getting busted by the Trace." He laughed. "Guess that just means I'll have to be creative if I want get ahead."

"*Well,*" Harry thought, "*creative is one word for what you end up doing.*"

"So who was the teacher who inspired you?" he asked aloud.

Peter smiled fondly. "Why don't I show you!" He snapped his fingers again, and the room blurred around Harry. After a few seconds of disorientation, the two of them were now sitting on the back row of the DADA classroom. It seemed the class had just been dismissed, and Harry noticed pint-

sized versions of the four Marauders standing up to leave, along with (to Harry's amusement) twelve-year-old versions of Lily Evans and *Severus Snape*! Even more amusingly, Snape seemed to be carrying Lily's books for her. Before the Marauders could exit, though, the DADA professor called out to Peter and asked him to stay behind.

Somewhat nervously, the boy made his way to the front after glancing back to the other three Marauders who left without even saying goodbye. At this age, Peter was quite overweight, and Harry was reminded of Dudley, though Dudley was never as shy and nervous as the boy now waiting in front of the DADA professor's desk for the man to finish the notes he'd been taking.

"You asked to see me, sir?" he asked timidly.

The professor finally looked up and gave Peter a piercing gaze. Harry frowned. The man seemed familiar, but Harry couldn't place the face. Obviously, whoever the man was, his appearance had changed a great deal in the years since this memory was set.

"Mr. Pettigrew, I wished to speak with you about your grades and your lack of attentiveness in my class. To be frank, both have been disappointing in the extreme. I expected much better from you given your heritage."

"My ... heritage, sir?" It was clear young Peter had no idea what the professor was talking about.

"When I started working here, the Headmaster made it plain that the faculty was not to show favoritism to any particular students, and I have sought to follow that instruction. But I cannot sit idly by and watch as the only son of Martin Pettigrew wastes his potential as the lowest-ranking member of a quartet of buffoonish delinquents. I

owe it to your father to do what I can to see that you live up to your potential."

Young Peter's eyes widened. "You ... you knew my father?"

"Yes. Quite well, in fact. He did not live long enough for us to develop a close friendship, but I found him to be a man of extraordinary intelligence and limitless potential. I was deeply grieved to learn of his tragic death and especially at such a young age. The wizarding world was diminished by his passing."

The boy was speechless. "I'm ... I'm sorry, sir. To have disappointed you ... and him." He swallowed deeply. "I ... don't know much about my father. I barely remember him, and Mother well, doesn't like to talk about him."

"I ... see," the professor said slowly. "And how is you ... sainted mother?"

Peter gave a wistful shrug. "She's okay. You probably know that she's sick a lot."

The professor nodded at that but said nothing. Finally, Peter spoke again.

"I, um, hate to ask, sir, but ... would it be okay if I came by to talk with you sometime? Maybe you could tell me more about my dad? That is if it's not an imposition or anything."

The man smiled, and Harry flinched. He knew it had been meant as a friendly smile, but Harry couldn't help but sense something hiding beneath it. Something ... unsettling.

"I will make you this offer. I will talk with you about your father, but *only* if you earn the privilege. I will give you material to study, and when you feel you have mastered it,

you will come to me and let me quiz you on it. If I am satisfied with your performance, then I will tell you about Martin Pettigrew. *But!* I will push you hard, young man. I warn you that I now consider it my personal project to mold you into a wizard your father would have been truly proud of. Do you understand, Mr. Pettigrew?"

Peter's back straightened, and a fire lit up in his eyes. "Yes sir. Whatever you say, Professor Rookwood."

At that, Harry's eyes practically bulged out of his head. *Now* he recognized the man, though this memory of him was decades younger than the version presently asleep in the Longbottom dungeons. "*Rookwood?!*" he thought furiously. "*Augustus Rookwood was a former DADA professor and young Peter Pettigrew's favorite teacher?!*"

And that appeared to be the case, judging by the look of pride and happiness on the faces of both the Second Year and Fifth Year iterations of Peter Pettigrew. If Pettigrew had fallen under Rookwood's influence during his school days, it explained a great deal but also raised even more questions than it answered.

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## **21 August 1993**

Longbottom Manor

10:00 a.m.

Over the next few days, Harry spent time talking with Sirius and Regulus. Both of them remembered Rookwood's tenure as DADA instructor, and both remembered him as a stern but competent teacher, at least by the standards of the usual Hogwarts Defense professor. In fact, each of them had been surprised to learn that Rookwood had been both an Unspeakable and a Death Eater, as he gave no indication



of either at the time and Sirius had already been incarcerated and Regulus had fled the country when he was exposed. Naturally, Regulus had researched Rookwood's background thoroughly once he'd committed himself to the Azkaban break-in. From what he had learned, Rookwood had probably not yet joined Voldemort at the time he taught at Hogwarts, although he likely did so within a few years of completing his one year as DADA professor. Both brothers thought it odd that an Unspeakable would spend a year teaching at Hogwarts, and Regulus had entertained the theory that his teaching position was a cover for some other assignment. Neither of them remembered any particular scandals or mysteries during that year, although Sirius seemed to recall Wormtail becoming much more studious after spending several hours a week with the man for "remedial DADA assignments."

After Harry's initial foray into the Map, the Marauders advised him that he would have to wait before returning. Apparently, hosting the mind of a sentient being along with the four artificial personalities was draining, and the Map would need time to recover. "*A few weeks,*" Mr. Moony had said, "*perhaps even a month or so. We'll play it by ear.*"

Harry spent the next week hard at work, from tutoring sessions with Moody to private practice with the Black Wand to spending more time getting to know Sirius (although Harry told him nothing about his possession of the Map). Finally, on the afternoon of the 20th, Severus Snape sent word that he was ready to attempt a Legilimency reading of one of the Lestrangle brothers. After some discussion, it was agreed that he would begin with Rabastan, the younger of the two brothers (and according to Lucius, the less intelligent of the two as well).

Upon arrival, the Potions Master explained what was involved in the interrogation process to the group. Then, he, Regulus, and Lady Augusta descended into the Longbottom dungeons while Lucius and Harry remained behind in the conference room. Lucius pulled two books out of his brief case and began flipping through them and taking notes. One was a copy of *Hogwarts: A History* and the other was *Hutchinson's Peerage*, which was a book detailing the lineages of the various Wizengamot families from their founding to the present day.

After a few minutes, Harry became uncomfortable with the silence. He knew what he wanted to discuss with the former Death Eater, but on this occasion his natural Legilimency provided no insights into how to proceed. He decided to start with something easy to perhaps break the ice.

"So, I guess Draco is already on his way to Durmstrang?" he asked.

Lucius answered without looking up from his research. "He left on the 16th. I imagine he's already Sorted and moved into his dormitory by now."

"They have Sortings at Durmstrang, too?"

"Yes, though they have seven houses instead of four. Beyond that, I don't really know anything about the process except that an ancient sarcastic Hat plays no role in the proceedings."

Harry nodded even though the man wasn't even looking at him. Nearly thirty seconds passed in silence while he tried to think of something else to ask before Lucius spoke up first.

"Mr. Potter," he said, still without looking up from his notes, "kindly ask me whatever is on your mind. Your weak efforts at dissimulation are distracting."

Harry scowled at the rebuke but then accepted the invitation to get right to the point. "Okay. Are you Theo No-Name's real father?"

At that, Lucius finally lifted his head and made eye contact with him. Unlike other occasions when Harry had caught the man off-guard, Lucius's mask was in place and was impeccable. Harry could see nothing of the storm of thoughts and emotions that now roiled behind that mask in response to his simple question.

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***14 August 1975***  
***Paris, France***

Lucius's eyes fluttered open as the warm Parisian sun filtered through the window of his small and simple attic apartment. The young man sat up in bed with a yawn and stretched his arms. Despite himself, he glanced around the room with a frown (as he had seemingly every single morning upon waking here for the past three years) and wondered how a son of House Malfoy had ended up in such a humble milieu. Was it really that much of a crime to have been born *second*? But then, the woman who shared his bed and his life stirred. He smiled.

*"Perhaps there are worse things than being impoverished and practically disowned if it can bring someone like this into my life. Living in a tiny garret with a beautiful woman who loves me as much as I love her. Why, it's almost like something out of that Muggle opera she so likes!"*

After a second, though, the smile faded from Lucius's face. As he recalled, *La Boheme* did not end happily for the two young lovers. In fact, the curtains closed on Rodolfo weeping over dead Mimi's body because he'd been too poor to afford medicine for her, an uncomfortable reminder of Lucius's own circumstances. In a year's time, perhaps less, Lucius Malfoy would complete his Charms Mastery. Unfortunately, that would also end his father's legal obligation to pay for his living expenses. Lucius was only twenty-two and had no immediate job prospects, and Abraxas Malfoy had made it clear that future support of any kind would be conditional on him taking the Dark Mark. Thus, his options were increasingly binary: marry Christina Fenwick and give her the life she deserved at the cost of subservience to the mysterious Dark Lork who his father venerated *or* see if a Mastery and the Malfoy name without any actual Malfoy backing could win him some minor Ministry job that would pay just enough for an equally sad apartment somewhere in Diagon Alley. Or worse, Knockturn Alley.

Suddenly, Lucius was distracted from these dark thoughts by the sound of pecking at the window. It was Lilith, Abraxas Malfoy's personal owl. Surprised, Lucius rose and headed over to let the bird in without even bothering to put on a robe. A part of him thought his father would have been scandalized at the thought of him greeting a post owl *au naturel*, but this was Paris after all. A naked man would hardly have been the most shocking thing for an owl to encounter. Lucius took the message and shooed the owl out of the window without so much as offering it a treat. Then, he tore open the letter and read his father's unexpected message.

"Hmm," he said in a tone of mild surprise and detached amusement.

"What is it?" came his lover's sleepy voice. "Good news or bad?"

Lucius gave Christina a half-smile. "Bit of both actually," he said almost mischievously. "My brother Claudius is dead."

Christina sat up in shock. "What? What happened?" she exclaimed.

"Well, according to this, dear Claudius had finalized his contract with Narcissa Black, and he was set to be married next week. I can't *imagine* why I didn't get an invitation. Anyway, some of his more loutish friends gave him a stag-do, he got roaringly drunk, and then he tried to celebrate by taking his favorite Abraxan for a midnight ride without a saddle. Never a good idea when the horse has wings, I'm afraid. The beast threw him from about twenty feet in the air."

"That's awful!" Then, she paused as she thought about what he'd said. "And a fall from that height killed him?"

"Eh? Oh no, it just broke his neck. But, well, Abraxans are aggressive carnivores, you see..."

The witch gasped. "Lucius! That's horrible! Don't joke about such things!"

He sauntered over to the bed. "Who's joking? A fitting end, I should say. One beast eaten by another."

She glared at him in consternation. "Well, true or not, it's ... indecent for you to be so blase about your own brother's death."

Lucius laughed. "Christina, my love, I don't know if I ever mentioned this, but Claudius Malfoy was a horrible, vile,

repugnant excuse for a wizard and an even worse excuse for a brother. But that's not the important thing!"

Christina crossed her arms. "Okay, I'll bite. What's the important thing?"

With that, Lucius actually threw himself onto the bed, landing next to his lover. "WE'RE RICH! *That's* the important thing! I'm the Malfoy heir now. No more eating stale bread in a drafty attic apartment! From now on, it will be champagne and foie gras every meal of the day!"

She looked away. "I hate foie gras," she said quietly.

Lucius sighed and placed his hand gently on her arm. "What troubles you, darling?"

She sighed dejectedly. "The Fenwicks aren't a Noble House, Luc. Your father might have tolerated me as the scandalous lower-class lover for his second son, but never as Lady Malfoy."

"My father will have no say in who I marry, Christina."

She scoffed. "How can you possibly believe that?"

Lucius lay back against the pillow with his arms folded behind his head. "What I *believe* is that I am the sole possible heir for a man in his 60's, Christina. There is literally no one else who can claim the Lordship other than me. Honestly, what other option could he have? Disown me out of sheer spite, remarry, and try to sire another male heir at his age?

Then, he grinned and let out a laugh. For perhaps the first time in his life, Lucius Malfoy was looking forward to seeing his father again. And even better, it would be at Claudius's

funeral! It would probably take all of his acquired Occlumency training to not grin through the whole ceremony.

Christina said nothing but simply looked at him pensively.

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**7 June 1976**

***The Great Hall of the Wizengamot***

"Do you, Lucius, son of Abraxas of the Ancient and Noble House of Malfoy, take this woman as your lawfully wedded wife?" intoned Edith MacMillan, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot.

"I do," Lucius said tersely, without an ounce of emotion on his face. His immaculate formal wedding robes spoke to the solemnity and excitement of the occasion, but his facial expression gave a far different impression. In fact, he rather looked like a man trying to maintain his poise and dignity while on his way to a hangman's noose. It didn't matter, though. Abraxas Malfoy stood next to him as his "best man" and projected enough happiness and satisfaction for them both. Of course, it didn't help Lucius any that he had to constantly fight the urge to rub the ugly tattoo on his forearm that he'd accepted just a few days before, the same tattoo that adorned his father's arm and those of nearly a dozen of the many dignitaries and luminaries who were in the Wizengamot hall to observe this union.

"And do you, Narcissa, daughter of Cygnus of the Ancient and Noble House of Black, take this man as your lawfully wedded husband?"

"I do," Narcissa said before smiling sweetly at her new husband. Next to her, Bellatrix Black Lestranger, Narcissa's

sister and maid-of-honor practically sneered at Lucius, her eyes lit up in cruel victory. He felt like vomiting.

The Chief Warlock addressed the rest of the assembly. "I now pronounce these two joined by magic and by vow as husband and wife. Let it be known, however, that this is no ordinary union. By their contract and as a token of their love and loyalty to one another, Lucius and Narcissa are joined not just as husband and wife but as co-equal partners to their joint marital estate. Upon Lucius's eventual accession to his Lordship, his wife shall not be known as Lady Malfoy, the title of a noble consort. Instead, they shall serve together as Master and Mistress of the House of Malfoy. In keeping with their wishes, I present to you all, Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy!"

Lucius and Narcissa looked up towards the representatives of the Wizengamot, all of whom applauded. Some out of politeness. Others out of vicious delight that a powerful union had been forged and bent to the service of their Lord and Master. As Lucius surveyed the room, he noticed that up in the viewer's gallery, Christina Fenwick suddenly rose and quickly left the chamber, wiping her eyes as she went. If Tiberius Nott, who sat alone in his family box, noticed his recently-announced fiancée's sudden departure, he gave no sign.

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**31 January 1980**

**11:30 p.m.**

**A private office at the Ministry of Magic set aside for the use of House Malfoy**

Lucius frowned in annoyance and then wadded up the parchment he'd been working on for hours and tossed it into a waste basket before starting fresh on a clean page.



Government budgets were complicated things under the best of circumstances, but even more so when one was trying draft one so as to clandestinely allow Ministry funds to be embezzled from the government to finance a terrorist organization without anyone knowing. At the moment, Lucius Malfoy was so engrossed with his work that he didn't even hear the door to his office open. Not until he caught the scent of a familiar perfume and looked up at once.

"*Christina*," he almost said aloud before catching himself.

"Lady Nott," he said instead as he rose from his seat. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this late night visit."

His former lover said nothing before producing a wand and covering the room with an array of privacy spells. Bemused, Lucius pulled his own wand out of his cane and added his own protections.

"And now that we are suitably hidden from eavesdroppers, Christina, I'll repeat the question. Why are you here?"

She moved to a chair across from his desk and sat down wearily. A pang of regret stabbed at Lucius's heart. It had three years since she'd married Tiberius Nott. She appeared to have aged ten or more.

"Tiberius is on a raid," she said in a tired voice. "But I have only recently learned that you no longer go on Death Eater raids since your father's death. Also, Narcissa is still recovering from giving birth. My congratulations on your new heir, by the way. Anyway, that makes this a good time for us to talk."

Lucius leaned back in his chair. He had indeed been fortunate. Since his father's death, he'd made the case that it was too dangerous for him to raid with the other Death

Eaters. If he were caught, Crouch would assuredly demand that the Malfoy assets be frozen pending investigation and confiscated upon a conviction. The value that the young Lord Malfoy provided the Dark Lord's movement as financier and politico vastly outweighed anything he could bring as a fighter even with his considerable skill with a wand, and so Lord Voldemort granted his request and put him in charge of those Death Eater cells tasked with infiltrating the Ministry.

"Very well, Christina. Talk."

She sniffed softly. "Such coldness from you, *Lord Malfoy*, and towards one you once talked of marrying. Have you really traded so much of your soul just to gain the Malfoy fortune?"

Lucius regarded her stoically. "The decisions I made, Lady Nott, are irrevocable, regardless of their wisdom. I am Lucius Lord Malfoy, husband of Narcissa Black Malfoy, father of Draco Malfoy, and faithful servant of the Dark Lord. And I am past the point of worrying about how much of my soul is compromised. I have sworn oaths and accepted responsibilities. I cannot spurn them now. Again, why are you here?"

Christina looked down, hurt at his response. She inhaled slowly. "Tiberius ... wishes to have another child."

"Does he now? And how is that my concern?"

"It is your concern, Lucius, because you are the reason for his sudden desire. He knows that Narcissa has given birth to a son, and he wishes me to provide him with a daughter. He believes that if I deliver a female child who enters Hogwarts with Draco, he can persuade you to enter into a

marriage contract between your house and his. Or, failing that, he can persuade the Dark Lord to *order* you to do so."

Lucius snorted. "Tiberius is getting a bit ahead of himself, I think. The Parkinsons have already started negotiations for their own newborn Pansy to marry Draco. And besides, there is no way to even guarantee that your next child will be a girl."

She swallowed painfully. "There are ways to ... improve the odds. Potions that can increase the likelihood of a preferred gender."

Malfoy's eyes widened in shock. "Those potions are *illegal*, Christina! Illegal and *dangerous*! Surely he would not endanger your life just to forge a marital alliance with my house!"

"Why not, Lucius?" Christina replied bitterly. "I have already given him an heir. I suspect I am quite expendable in his eyes now."

Lucius gripped the arms of his chair tightly, but then, he closed his eyes and let his fury drain away. "Even if what you say is true, Christina, what do you expect me to do about it?"

She leaned forward and spoke with urgency. "You can *take me away*, Luc. Let us *flee* Britain. This very night! To Australia or the Americas. I *know* you have no loyalty to the Dark Lord. Only the oaths forced upon you by your father and that deranged succubus he made you take as a wife." But despite that urgency, Lucius's face remained impassive. Christina sat back dejectedly. "Or perhaps it is not your oaths which bind you. Perhaps it is simply the fear of losing all that precious gold that sits in the Malfoy vaults! After all, that is why you left me in the first place!"

Lucius looked down and drew his forefinger and thumb across his eyes. "Christina, I ... I'm sorry. But there is more at stake than gold or vows. I have *obligations* now. I have a newborn son who I cannot abandon to be raised alone by Narcissa according to the traditions of House Black. And I have..." He looked away for a moment. "I have other obligations as well. People who I have sworn to protect from the Dark Lord as best I can. I'm sorry. But I cannot simply run away from my responsibilities. Not even for you."

He gazed at the woman's face and tried to pretend that her expression wasn't breaking his heart. "You should go, Christina. Do not come to see me privately again. People will talk. Go now."

She rose and headed towards the door. But as she reached for the handle, she paused and turned back to him. "Do you ever miss it, Luc?"

"Miss what?"

"That drafty garret apartment with the stale bread and the tiny window that looked out over the Seine?"

"No," he lied.

She nodded sadly and left the office. The next time Lucius Malfoy would see Christina Fenwick Nott, she would be lying in repose.

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***Now...***

"No, Mr. Potter," Malfoy replied coldly. "I am not the outcast's father. Though I am hardly surprised that Tiberius Nott might think otherwise. The former Lady Nott and I had been ... in a relationship prior to our marriages to other

people. Indeed, I had suspected that Tiberius only pursued a marriage contract with Christina Fenwick as a way of striking back at me. He has always been jealous of me for many reasons, and forcing my former paramour into marrying him was something he probably viewed as a victory over me. But I never broke my vows to Narcissa while we were married. I have committed many sins in my time, but adultery was never one of them."

He looked thoughtful for a moment. "Of course, now that you raise the question, it would explain why Tiberius went to such extremes as the Ultimate Sanction. If I *were* the outcast's true sire, I would be immune to the Sanction's effects and, in fact, would be one of the few people who could legally adopt the boy and *end* those effects. Doubtless, Nott thought I would be so moved by the boy's torment that I *would* adopt him even though doing so would conclusively prove that I had cuckolded him, thereby leaving myself open to charges of line theft. As his House is Ancient and Noble, the penalty for that would have been up to ten years in Azkaban and forfeiture of most of my remaining assets."

"But since you are *not* Theo's true father, that's not an issue," Harry said.

"Correct, Mr. Potter. You may, of course, choose to think that I am lying about the matter and am cruelly rejecting my illegitimate son in order to avoid embarrassment, financial ruin, and jail. Or you may accept what I have told you at face value. Either way, the practical effect on the outcast is the same, and honestly, I really don't care what you think of me as a person. You have my answer. I will thank you not to raise this matter again."

Harry nodded silently, and Lucius returned to his research.

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A few hours later, Snape completed his probe. Unfortunately, it would not be possible to safely dose Rabastan a second time with Draught of Living Death for at least a week, as doing so might prove fatal. And while none of the conspirators were particularly concerned with preserving the Death Eater's life, they all agreed he might still be useful, so he was instead stunned and then bound in a mask, chains, and a straitjacket for the time being, much like Augustus Rookwood in the next cell. Then, the three conspirators rejoined their compatriots in the conference room where Hoskins had prepared a platter of watercress sandwiches and a strong pot of tea.

"Well? Good news or ill?" Lucius asked.

A visibly exhausted Severus Snape took his seat at the table, as did Augusta and Regulus. It was clear that the latter two knew nothing of what he had learned as he wanted to explain everything at once to the whole group.

"A mixed bag," the Potions Master said after swallowing a bite from a sandwich, "but on the whole, things went quite well. To begin with, my concerns about probing the Lestrangle brothers were overstated. Although they studied Occlumency under Rookwood to some degree, it seems Boruslav Lestrangle refused to allow him unfettered access to his sons' minds. Consequently, they are not protected by any of the psychic traps I feared would be in place, and their existing Occlumency defenses after years of continuous Dementor exposure are no match for a master Legilimens. Bellatrix is another matter, for reasons I shall explain shortly."

"Boruslav Lestrangle," Harry murmured. The name was familiar, and Lucius answered his unspoken inquiry.

"The former Lestrangle patriarch. And also the former Potions instructor at Durmstrang. A master alchemist who pioneered the mass-production of magic-resistant orichalcum. And the only reason Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrangle were ever allowed into the Dark Lord's Inner Circle. Boruslav made their induction one of his conditions for swearing allegiance to the Dark Lord."

"If the name seems familiar to you, Harry," said Augusta, "you may recall that my daughter-in-law Alice killed Boruslav Lestrangle in a duel in April of 1980. Many believe that revenge for Boruslav Lestrangle's death was part of the reason why the Lestranges attacked Longbottom Manor after You-Know-Who's fall."

Harry nodded at that before turning back to the three ex-Death Eaters. "What exactly *was* the Inner Circle? Who all was in it?"

"A complicated question, Mr. Potter," said Snape. "The vast majority of Death Eaters, who numbered in the thousands, consisted of career criminals, mercenaries, and ignorant fools consumed by anti-Muggleborn bigotry, as well as those blackmailed, bribed, or Imperiused into serving the cause. The Inner Circle consisted of about thirty or so Death Eaters who were considered particularly loyal and capable or who brought specialized gifts and advantages to the table that warranted the Dark Lord's personal attentions. Only those few Death Eaters were actually given the Dark Mark which served as a method of communication directly with the Dark Lord. Some of the Inner Circle were charged with overseeing the various Death Eater cells and directing terrorist and guerilla actions. Others worked on special projects at the Dark Lord's personal direction. For example, I rarely went on raids because I served as the Dark Lord's personal Potions Master."

"Whereas I," interrupted Lucius, "mainly handled the money side of the operation, which was my own excuse for mostly avoiding raids. I imagine the Dark Lord wanted to mark Regulus to use him for field work." He turned to the younger man. "Did the Dark Lord ever realize you were a Metamorphmagus?"

Regulus shrugged. "Not to my knowledge. I think he mainly wanted me for my combat skill and because he thought that I would eventually become Lord Black."

Harry absorbed all that. "Would Pettigrew have been marked? Or your, um, ex-wife?"

"Everyone in the Inner Circle received the Dark Mark," said Lucius, "but those members who were most trusted by the Dark Lord or who worked as spies could conceal their Dark Marks at will from both magical and mundane observation, though that characteristic of the Mark ceased to function once a bearer had been confirmed as a Death Eater by other means. Erasmus and Linnea Wilkes, Augustus Rookwood, and Berith Selwyn all had been seen many times with bare unmarked arms until they were eventually captured in Death Eater regalia and exposed, at which point their marks were plainly visible. It seems unlikely that Pettigrew could have avoided rolling up his sleeves for twelve years, but he may have been granted a Dark Mark that could be concealed. Or he may simply have not been Marked yet at the time of the Dark Lord's fall. *Or* he may not have been high enough in the Dark Lord's esteem to even be invited into the Inner Circle. I am, however, quite certain Narcissa can conceal her Mark."

"This is all interesting, if lurid," interrupted Augusta, "but what did you learn about You-Know-Who's horcruxes?"



Snape looked almost pained at her Gryffindor directness. "Unfortunately, Rabastan knew nothing of that, and I honestly don't think the Dark Lord would have ever trusted Boruslav with a horcrux, let alone either of his sons. *But* Rabastan did recall Rodolphus telling him once that the Dark Lord had presented Bellatrix with a magical artifact of some kind and charging her with protecting it at all costs. Apparently, Rodolphus was somewhat jealous of Bellatrix being more trusted by the Dark Lord than himself."

"What was the artifact?" Harry asked

"Rabastan never saw it, but Rodolphus described it as a golden chalice. He has no idea what it was or where it was hidden or what protections were set in place around it."

Lucius started suddenly and then pulled out one of the books he'd been researching. He opened it to a particular page and set it in the middle of the table. There was a detailed drawing of an ornate goblet. "Here. The Golden Cup of Helga Hufflepuff. I am certain that was the item turned into a horcrux and given to Bellatrix."

"What makes you so sure?" asked Regulus.

Lucius gave him a smug look. "I have spent considerable time researching the brief post-graduate career of the mysterious Tom Marvolo Riddle. A difficult topic of research due to the Fidelius Charm that still conceals much of his past. *But* I did discover that shortly before he disappeared from Wizarding Britain, he was briefly detained in connection with the death of Lady Hepzibah Smith, the former matriarch of the Noble House of Smith which is the only surviving cadet house descended from the line of Hufflepuff."

"How did she die?" Harry asked.

"Officially, an aged house elf accidentally mistook a box of rat poison for sugar when preparing her afternoon tea, but naturally, a competent Slytherin could have arranged that by any number of means. What matters is that Riddle was never a suspect in Smith's death, but he was held briefly in connection with the disappearance two priceless magical artifacts from her personal collection that had come up missing during the inventory of her estate. After a few hours in custody, he was released for lack of evidence, and then he essentially vanished from Wizarding Britain. As for the artifacts, one was the aforementioned Cup which had been passed down from Smith matriarch to matriarch for centuries. The *other*, however, was an artifact from a *different* Founder, one that Smith had recently purchased from Borgin and Burkes!"

"Slytherin's Locket!" Regulus exclaimed.

"The same," Lucius said. "Before it turned up in a booby-trapped cave on the coast of Essex, the last reported location of Slytherin's Locket was with Hepzibah Smith just weeks prior to her death. And if Riddle stole the one ..."

"He undoubtedly stole the other," finished Snape.

"Unfortunately, that still doesn't give us its current location. I will examine Rodolphus Lestrage in October during the first Hogsmeade weekend, but it is entirely possible that Bellatrix did not share with him the hiding place or protections of the Cup. I will probably have to probe Bellatrix's mind which *is* protected by the full range of mental defenses which Rookwood's training techniques could provide. Which brings us to the first of two other matters that came to light during my interrogation of Rabastan Lestrage that bear discussion."

Snape hesitated and glanced at Augusta who he suspected would not care for either bit of news.

"From reviewing Rabastan's memories, it is ... possible that Bellatrix Lestrange is ... not fully culpable for her actions," he said before wincing at the glare Lady Augusta gave him.

"*Not. Fully. Culpable?!*" she practically growled. "That vile woman eagerly confessed to everything she was accused of in open court. I was *there!*"

"I know, Lady Augusta, I know. At the time of her trial, Bellatrix was utterly devoted to the service of the Dark Lord. She was also his most accomplished assassin and, after the death of Erasmus Wilkes, essentially his right hand." He turned to Lucius and Regulus. "But tell me – does that description comport with your memories of Bellatrix when she was younger?"

The two men looked at one another. "Honestly," Regulus said, "I always found it a bit odd. I mean, she'd been raised to be a blood purist just like the rest of us Blacks. But when we were younger, she was never that aggressive about it. Or as cruel as the reports said she was. If anything, I always found her to be a bit shy and reserved when we were kids, at least compared to her sisters and Sirius, anyway. And I know for a fact that she refused to cut ties with Andromeda after she married a Muggleborn. Well, at first. I'm pretty sure she did by the time she took the Dark Mark."

Lucius nodded. "Bellatrix was two years ahead of Narcissa and myself. My recollection of her at school was she was somewhat aloof and studious. Nothing at all like the cackling madwoman we found at Azkaban. When we served the Dark Lord, she was ruthless and calculating and certainly not given to singing childish songs, which I

attribute to Dementor-induced madness. But when she was a Seventh Year, I remember her as planning to apply for the Auror Academy and being fairly disinterested in the Dark Lord and his movement. Moreover, she was *very* disinterested in Rodolphus Lestrangle. To the point of hexing him rather viciously when he wouldn't take no for an answer."

"So what changed?" Harry asked.

Snape exhaled with a surprising degree of bitterness.

"***Occlumency: A Beginner's Guide*** by Mr. Nemo." Harry's eyes widened at the mention of the book that had turned his brother into a violent thug after just a few weeks.

"Yes, Mr. Potter," Snape continued. "The same book that fell into Jim Potter's grubby little hands. But where he only read a few chapters, Bellatrix was induced to read the whole thing, cover-to-cover. The book was designed to teach Occlumency quickly, but it does so by reordering the reader's very mind. The version that Bellatrix was exposed to also had additional passages edited out of your brother's copy, passages that would render the reader obsessed with gaining the Dark Lord's favor and with adopting his social and political views regarding Wizarding society. It would also install psychic '*back doors*' that would have allowed either August Rookwood or the Dark Lord himself to further refine the subject's personality. This process was used to secure Bellatrix Lestrangle's loyalty to the Death Eaters ... and also to compel her to submit to the desires of Rodolphus Lestrangle, who she had spurned during their school days."

"So, she was *brainwashed*," Harry said. "Can she be cured?"

Snape shrugged. "I honestly do not know. I have barely scratched the surface of Rookwood's advances in the psychic arts. I cannot imagine any curative attempt that wouldn't take years or even decades nor one which isn't as likely to leave her catatonic as to cure her."

"You said Bellatrix was *induced to read* Mr. Nemo's book," Lucius said slowly. "Induced by whom?"

The Potions Master grimaced. "Bellatrix received a copy of Rookwood's book as a graduation present from her youngest sister – Narcissa."

Even Lucius was shocked to learn that Narcissa Black had given her own sibling a cursed book designed to alter her mind and brainwash her into serving the Dark Lord. Finally, Augusta spoke up.

"All of this is well and good, Severus. But none of it matters in comparison to the information about You-Know-Who's horcruxes which we have hired you to obtain. So let us put into abeyance the question of whether we will attempt to *heal* Bellatrix Lestrange or simply put her out of her misery." From the older woman's tone, it was quite clear which option she preferred. She picked up the teapot to pour another cup for herself as she spoke. "Is there anything else you gleaned from the mind of Rabastan Lestrange?"

At that question, Snape grimaced even harder and prepared to defend himself in case Augusta decided to hex him.

"Yes, Lady Augusta." He took a deep breath. "There is some evidence that Barty Crouch Jr. may still be alive."

And then, Harry and the three men all jumped as the teapot crashed to the floor and shattered.

"... *what?*" said Frank Longbottom's mother in a voice as cold as the grave.

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***24 August 1993, 8:30 p.m.***

***The DADA Instructor's Private Living Quarters at Hogwarts***

It had a long and tiring day for Hogwarts' newest faculty member, but his work was nearly done. His classroom and quarters were set up for his liking, as was the large ballroom now repurposed both for the dueling club he'd grudgingly inherited and for the school-wide lessons he would be giving on the Patronus Charm. Fortuitously, he'd recently ingratiated himself with a young Slytherin graduate who could actually cast the blasted thing (for he himself had never mastered it) and who had agreed to serve as a teacher's assistant. Rufus Scrimgeour smiled. The things young people would do for a good reference.

He had just sat down to review his first week's lesson plans when there was a knock on his door.

"Enter." He was not terribly surprised when Albus Dumbledore came in. Scrimgeour had been ensconced at the school for several days, and the Headmaster had not yet come by for some of their traditional repartee. In fact, Scrimgeour thought he was overdue.

"Good evening, Rufus. I just wanted to see how you were settling in."

"Quite well, Albus. Quite well, indeed. Would you care for a glass of port?" As he spoke, Scrimgeour hobbled over to a

sideboard where a decanter and several glasses rested.

"No, but thank you," he demurred.

"As you wish. Well, as you can see, I'm fully settled in." Scrimgeour smirked slightly as he poured a glass for himself. "Was there ... anything else you wanted to discuss?"

Dumbledore gave a long-suffering sigh. "You really do abhor small talk, don't you, Rufus."

"Only with you, old friend. You use idle chit-chat to be disarming. And I hate being disarmed."

The Headmaster shook his head. "I had a conference with the Board of Directors. There was some discussion over the wisdom of teaching the Patronus Charm to all seven years. I wanted to confirm that you felt up to the challenge."

The ex-auror took a sip and enjoyed the burn of the liquor down his throat. "I must confess that I am not personally able to cast the Charm, but I am fully versed in the theory. Also, I've offered Marcus Flint some post-graduate credit and a small stipend if he assists me in the project."

"Post-graduate credit?"

Scrimgeour nodded. "He'll get some bonus points retroactively applied to his Charms NEWT, enough to raise him to a solid Outstanding. I'd have applied it to his DADA NEWT, but he'd already received an O on that exam."

"I was not aware it was possible to grant bonus points on a NEWT. And especially not retroactively."

The other man shrugged. "Griselda Marchbanks owed me a favor. I got her grandson off from a charge of Second

Degree Mugglebaiting back in '84."

"I see," Dumbledore said with a look of faint disapproval. "And I take it you are familiar with young Flint's background?"

"That he's the son of an unmarked Death Eater who was looking to follow in his father's shady footsteps until the mysterious Harry Potter did something to change the boy's career trajectory? Yes, I'm aware." Scrimgeour smiled at the Headmaster, who crooked an eyebrow.

"Is it just my imagination, Rufus, or do you have something more than a casual professional interest in young Harry Potter?"

"Nothing prurient or malicious, I assure you. But you must admit that he represents an intriguing collection of anomalies. He is the twin brother of the Boy-Who-Lived but was raised under drastically different circumstances. He has natural Legilimency which specifically manifests as a deductive genius not unlike the form of Legilimency I was born with. He is also the son of my replacement as Chief Auror with whom he has an antagonistic relationship, a fact that might be of use to me in the future."

Dumbledore stared at the man who he had considered a friend for many decades in visible surprise. "I am sorry, Rufus, but you quite caught me off guard. I was unprepared for something so unexpected as you actually being direct and honest."

Scrimgeour shrugged and took another sip of port. "You are well-skilled at Legilimency yourself, Albus. I could have obfuscated, but I imagine you'd have figured out my intentions towards Harry Potter before you left. However, we'd have probably been up past midnight in the process,



and it's been a long day. In any case, put your mind at ease. I have no ill intentions towards Harry Potter or any other student."

"Beyond the fact that you aspire to use Harry Potter against James Potter in some way," Dumbledore said drily.

The other man chuckled. "I'm Slytherin, Albus. We use everyone in every way that we possibly can. I suspect a clever young snake like Harry Potter would expect nothing less of me. As for James Potter, I give him a year in his current position. Maybe less. He would be a poor Chief Auror in the best of circumstances, but with the Azkaban breakout and everything else that's happened, he's a train wreck in the making. I plan to be well-positioned when that train finally runs off the tracks."

The Headmaster blinked in confusion. "You think serving as DADA professor will position you for eventually reclaiming the Chief Auror's job?"

"Oh no, my friend. My injuries make it highly unlikely for me to ever work in any sort of active law enforcement. *But* when James falls, Amelia Bones will be the only plausible replacement. Cornelius Fudge will ask her to laterally transfer into his job, and then I will graciously accept the office of DMLE Director when it's offered to me. And a few years after that, when Fudge's unfitness finally catches up with him, I will support Amelia as the next Minister in exchange for reforms and increased funding in the DMLE that will ensure we aren't caught flat-footed like last time. Besides, we both know I wasn't going to teach for more than a year – the job is cursed after all. But it's a year I can spend strengthening political ties with Wizengamot families through their children here at

Hogwarts, as well as a year I can spend recuperating and undergoing rehabilitation therapy with Madam Pomfrey."

Dumbledore sighed again. "I think I will take that glass of port after all." As Scrimgeour turned back to the decanter, the Headmaster continued. "Why are you even telling me all this? I've never known you to be this direct. And what if I revealed what you've said to James Potter?"

"You won't. You know what's at stake, Albus. You-Know-Who is out there, gathering strength and seeking the means to restore himself. Several of his most formidable servants have been freed from Azkaban, presumably to aid his eventual return. *And* we now know he made at least one horcrux, which tells us a great deal about his power, his knowledge, and his propensity for utter evil that we could never have truly appreciated before now.

You *need* someone like me at the levers of government. I know you're fond of your Gryffindor golden boy, but in times like these, spurious ethics are far less valuable than cold pragmatism. You know I'm right even if you cannot yet admit it to yourself. And that is why you won't repeat anything I just said to Potter. It would do nothing except burn a bridge between us while undermining his self-confidence. And I suspect his confidence will already be taking a hit sooner rather than later."

"As for why I'm telling you this," he continued as he handed a glass over to his old friend and then took a seat behind his desk while Dumbledore sat opposite. "Well, I *am* the Hogwarts DADA professor. The great majority of my predecessors have been some combination of incompetent and malicious. You know perfectly well that I am not the former, and I thought it best to reassure you that I am not the latter. My agenda here at Hogwarts is perfectly

straightforward. Well, for a Slytherin definition of straightforward."

"Be that as it may, I'm not entirely comfortable with you using your position here to advance your political ambitions by ingratiating yourself with the students."

Rufus barked out a laugh. "Why not? You never had a problem with Slughorn for all those years!"

Dumbledore grimaced. "Yes, well, he was well-ensconced long before I became Headmaster. So much so that he had a network of followers ready to storm the castle if I'd tried to rein him in. While I consider Horace Slughorn a friend despite our differences, I wasn't entirely sorry to see him retire, and I am not eager to have another professor follow in his footsteps, even if only for a year."

"I don't blame you. By the way, how *did* you get him to retire?"

"He finally crossed a line that allowed me to credibly threaten him with termination even if it upset the Slug Club Alumni."

"Oh?"

Dumbledore took a sip from his glass and frowned slightly at the taste. He rarely indulged in liquor of any kind. "Yes, he got bored with his Sixth Year NEWTS Potions class and added Amortentia to the curriculum without bothering to collect all of the samples brewed. There were some unpleasant incidents. Nothing with any serious or lasting consequences, but enough to cause embarrassment to the children of influential parents. I persuaded him that it was time to take a break from academia."

"And just in time to replace him with your reformed Death Eater," Scrimgeour said with a smirk.

"I have complete faith in Severus, Rufus. And the intelligence he brought us during the war was of inestimable value."

"Yes, of course. Whatever it takes for the Greater Good."

The Headmaster crooked an eyebrow. "Is there a hidden meaning in that remark, Rufus?"

"I was merely thinking about our conversation last June in which you denounced the idea of '*The Greater Good*' as a philosophical goal. Surely, however, removing a tenured professor with whom you'd had such a long friendship in favor of a 21-year-old freshly-minted Potions Master who'd been your spy during the war is an example of acting for the Greater Good, no matter how distasteful you find the concept in general."

Dumbledore shook his head. "The phrase '*For the Greater Good*' is associated with utilitarianism, Rufus, the doctrine that actions are per se correct if they benefit more people than they harm. It's a shortened form of the longer expression "the greatest good for the greatest number," a concept which necessarily implies that some people must suffer so that a greater number of people will benefit. I refuse to engage in such calculus if it involves intentionally inflicting suffering no matter what the potential Good. In any case, Horace was already planning retirement even before I began my ... association with Severus Snape. I fail to see how my actions pertaining to Severus's employment are unacceptably utilitarian."

"Perhaps not," Scrimgeour said as he studied his port while swirling it around in its glass. "But let's be honest. We both

know that for all your current reticence, there have been times when you have been persuaded to act according to the Greater Good in the past."

There was a tiny twitch on the left side of Dumbledore's mouth that only Scrimgeour and perhaps ten other people in the world would have recognized as a mixture of apprehension and, perhaps, guilt.

"You have me at a loss, Rufus. Whatever do you mean?"

The man's smile was almost predatory. "Some people collect stamps, Albus. Others collect chocolate frog cards. I collect *secrets*. For example ... I know about Romulus."

At that, barely recognizable expressions flashed across the faces of both men almost simultaneously. To Scrimgeour, Dumbledore's face betrayed both surprise at his knowledge of the Romulus Affair and, more interestingly, relief that he was not referring to something from the Headmaster's past that both invoked the Greater Good principle and was even more potentially embarrassing. He filed that away for future investigation. To Dumbledore, on the other hand, Scrimgeour's expression revealed that the other man now knew he had even bigger secrets in his past but the ex-auror had no idea what they were. Both men instantly knew what the other had deduced about their own lapses in self-control and both successfully hid their mutual annoyance about giving anything away to another Legilimens.

Dumbledore took another sip of his port. "Romulus, eh? Do the Unspeakables know that you've been looking through their top secret files, Rufus? I hear they take a dim view of such things."

Rufus shrugged again. "I've been lucky so far, I suppose. In that regard at least."

"I hope your luck continues for the sake of your health and safety. But to answer your insinuations, Romulus represented the last gasp of my willingness to be persuaded by appeals to the Greater Good. It taught me the hard way that some lines should not be crossed no matter what the assumed societal benefit. I hope you will take the lessons I learned to heart in your future political endeavors both inside and outside of Hogwarts."

The Headmaster rose and placed the now empty glass on the desk. "This has been a most stimulating conversation, Rufus. We should do this more often."

"My door is always open to you, Albus."

The old man headed out the door but then stopped on the threshold. "Oh, and Rufus? I hope I don't need to remind you that it is a crime to use active Legilimency against anyone here, student or staff, without consent?"

"I wouldn't dream of doing so, Albus."

Dumbledore nodded and closed the door behind him, leaving Professor Scrimgeour to his stacks of lesson plans.

## Chapter End Notes

AN1: I am somewhat frustrated that after more than 18,000 words, an arc called "Back to School" has not actually managed to get the kids back to school. I really should have named this chapter and the last something else. Anyway, it was necessary because there are some things that absolutely had to happen before the start of the school year or it would have caused problems later, but I worry that people will think that Death Eater Menace will end up longer than The Secret Enemy, which I don't think will be the case. Rest assured, next

chapter will end with Harry et al. reaching Hogwarts, though not without incident. And once the kids are at Hogwarts, the pace should pick up quickly.

AN2: This chapter does not represent any sort of redemption arc for Peter or even an attempt to justify his actions. Peter Pettigrew was and is a Death Eater. Unlike Bellatrix or Lucius, he was neither mind-controlled nor bribed/blackmailed into joining Voldemort. He made his choices and, at this point, doesn't even regret them in the slightest. Rather, this chapter is the beginning of an exploration into to how and why Peter made those choices, something completely lacking in canon, which, frankly, veers close to saying that Peter became a traitor simply because he was short, fat and unlikeable while Sirius was good looking and popular and eventually played by Gary Oldman instead of a relatively minor British character actor.

# **Back to School (finale)**

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## **CHAPTER 14: Back to School (pt 3)**

**26 August 1993**

**8:30 a.m.**

### **The Tonks Clinic and Personal Residence**

As the sun beamed through the kitchen windows of the Tonks household, Theo No-Name sat down for breakfast with his de facto guardians and their daughter. The boy had been made well-aware of young Nymphadora's antipathy for her given name, but it was impractical to call her "Tonks" around the house since everyone else who lived there had the same surname, so she finally gave him permission to call her "Dora," Ted's pet name for her. Andromeda usually insisted on calling her "Nymphadora" and in fact seemed to derive a minor but perverse pleasure from doing so. But while the Tonkses had been nothing but welcoming since his arrival, Theo was aware of the growing tension in the household. Ever since the Azkaban breakout, Dora had been put on inactive status with the aurors, and based on the news reports, it was to some extent because of him. Theo's own ex-father had been the one to suggest in front of the Wizengamot that the family's charitable act of welcoming an outcast like him into their home suggested something nefarious. Combined with the family's blood relationship to several of the escapees and the probable involvement of Metamorphmagi, the residents of Hogsmeade had been giving the Tonks Clinic the evil eye for weeks now, and the number of patients Ted and Andi saw



had dropped noticeably. Theo felt sure that the Ultimate Sanction was only making things worse for them all.

Just as the Tonkses and their summer guest were tucking into their morning meal, their house elf Iris popped into the room bearing an envelope.

"A letter has arrived for the young master by owl post. It says it's from Hoggy Warts." The tiny creature handed the letter to Theo.

"Thank you, Iris," he said before opening the envelope with some trepidation. Good news had been on short supply this summer.

*To all Hogwarts students,*

*It has come to my attention that many of our students have expressed difficulty in studying effectively within the individual Houses due to the school's current communal dorm structure. It has been suggested that by requiring all students of the same year to share a single common dorm room, Hogwarts has deprived its student body of the benefits of privacy and solitude necessary for academic progress. While I am mindful of the importance of tradition, and particularly traditions dating back to the time of the Founders, I am nevertheless committed to exploring every avenue to improve academic performance. And so, with the permission of the Hogwarts Board of Governors, I have instituted a pilot program for the coming school year. Beginning this September, the dungeon level that previously housed all of the Third Year Slytherin students will instead be divided into separate private rooms for each individual student. The academic progress of the Third Year Slytherin class will be compared at the end of the year with both the other three Houses and with prior Slytherin exam*

*results, and if there is noticeable improvement, this program may be expanded in coming years to the rest of the student body. Room assignments will be provided to the affected students at the Welcoming Feast, at which I look forward to seeing you all once again.*

*Until then, I remain*

*Prof. Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore  
Headmaster, Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft*

Theo read through the letter twice before sharing its contents with the Tonkses. "It seems I'm getting a private room this year, along with all the other Slytherins in my class." He frowned. "I don't know if that's good or bad. On the one hand, I won't have to share a room with people who might want to do something to me in the night. On the other, I won't have any witnesses if people break into my room to do something to me in the night."

"I'd focus on the former, Theo," said Andi drily. "Pessimism is rarely helpful. But just to be on the safe side, I'll provide you with a few nasty but non-lethal wards I learned from the Black family grimoire."

"Will the Doctors Tonkses be requiring anything further for breakfast?" Iris asked.

"No, Iris," said Ted. "Everything was excellent as usual. Oh, and I wanted to let you know. Professor Snape will be sending a house elf by later to pick up a package of potions. Andi and I may be out doing some house calls when the elf arrives. The package is next to the floo and is marked with Snape's name."

"Iris will tend to Professor Snape's elf when he arrives," the elf said before popping away.

"Maybe I ought to have one of you give me a refresher course in potion brewing," Dora said disconsolately. "My auror career is over before it began, I think."

"You'll get through this, sweetheart," Ted replied. "They'll catch those escapees and prove you had nothing to do with the escape."

The girl snorted but said nothing.

"And either way," said Andromeda, "sitting around here mooning over your problems won't accomplish anything, Nymphadora. Go out and do something with all this free time you have. Think of it as a vacation."

Dora stood up from the table angrily and headed for the door. "Unpaid involuntary leave is not a *vacation*, Mother! AND DON'T CALL ME NYMPHADORA!"

Soon after, the front door of the Tonks Clinic opened and then slammed shut. Theo winced.

"She really hates that name, doesn't she?" he asked the girl's parents.

"She does indeed," Andromeda answered with a mischievous smile. "That's the reason we never let her even try to have it changed. She's still at the age where she needs to rebel about something. An embarrassing name gives her something to rebel against in a way she won't regret later."

Theo took that in without comment. He found the answer unconvincing, but then he also knew that the Ministry made it surprisingly difficult to change one's name through legal means as opposed to magical. If some kind of magical effect resulted in a name change, it was automagically altered to

the new name on most legal documents bearing the original one. But changing a name non-magically was a lengthy process.

"If you don't mind my asking, why did you name her Nymphadora anyway? I'd understand if she'd been named after a heavenly body since that's a Black family tradition, but Nymphadora isn't a star or constellation or anything. And I know it's not a Muggle name."

Andi smiled again, this time looking downright devious. "If I tell you, will you swear never to tell her the truth?"

"ANDROMEDA TONKS!" Ted exclaimed with surprise. "You *promised!*"

"I promised I'd never tell *her*. And to be honest, I've born the brunt of her hatred of that name a lot more than you have, dear husband."

Ted said nothing, but he looked surprisingly embarrassed and petulant as Andi turned back to Theo.

"She was supposed to have been named Callisto Theodora Tonks. Callisto was a nymph from Greek mythology, and one of Jupiter's moons is named for her. Theodora is the name of Ted's grandmother who is also his namesake. *Unfortunately*, while I was spending seventeen hours in labor giving birth to our little bundle of joy, Ted was overcome with nerves and accidentally took too many Calming Draughts. When our daughter was finally born, he was so addled that all he could remember was something about a nymph named Dora which is what ended up on the birth certificate. I sent my very first wandless hex at him when I found out, but then I decided we'd just keep it as it was. I thought it would be character building."

"Character ... building?" Theo asked in confusion.

She nodded. "When people won't respect the name you were born with, you learn to make them respect you for yourself."

Theo nodded slowly at that as he wondered if she'd meant her words to apply to his own situation. He picked up the Hogwarts letter to read it again.

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### ***Later that afternoon ...***

Iris was busy dusting in the parlor when a soft pop heralded the arrival of another house elf.

"Good afternoon. Dobby greets you on behalf of his master, the Great Harry Potter. Dobby is here to collect some potions which were being sent for by Potion Master Snape."

Iris studied the other elf with remarkable intensity for a house elf. "Dobby, is it? Iris has heard tell of the ... *exploits* of the one called Dobby." She walked over as if to examine the other elf who swallowed deeply and let his ears sag noticeably.

"Iris was given to understand that the Dobby elf was ... *unwell*." Her tone seemed to indicate distaste, and it was clear that she had wanted to use a word even less flattering than "unwell." Dobby quailed for a few seconds before straightening his back and returning Iris's gaze without flinching.

"Dobby was indeed ... *unwell*. But Dobby is recovered now. Dobby is a good elf."

Iris stepped even closer and then inhaled deeply as if taking in Dobby's scent. The other elf grimaced slightly. Finally, she took a step back.

"Iris *conditionally* approves."

Dobby relaxed. "Dobby is grateful and will strive to be worthy of Iris's approval."

The female elf said nothing. She merely snapped her fingers, and the package flew from the next room into the parlor and Dobby's waiting hands. He bowed to Iris and raised his hand to snap his own fingers. But then, he paused and gave a somewhat pained expression.

"Iris," he said. "Please forgive Dobby's impertinence, but Dobby could not help but notice the signs. Is Iris's time ..."

"Yes," she interrupted quickly but calmly. "Very soon, Iris thinks. Iris cannot see the shape of it but ... yes, very soon."

Dobby bowed again but more slowly and with much deeper respect, and his face assumed an unreadable expression that somehow mixed sadness with awe. "Dobby wishes Iris good luck."

She nodded but remained silent, and without another word, Dobby was gone.

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***From a letter received by Rita Skeeter and written in disappearing ink...***

*Rita,*

*As per usual, this letter will self-immolate once read completely, so take notes as you go. Below is all the easily*

*available information pertaining to Dolores Jane Umbridge. As you may realize after reading this letter, there may be some less easily available information about the subject, but think hard before you ask me to dig into it. Some skeletons are best left buried.*

*Subject was born in 1955 to Orford Umbridge (Pureblood but not of any Noble line) and Muggle Ellen Cracknell (ostensibly - see below). Has one squib younger brother, current status unknown. The Muggle apparently had some family history of mental illness, and Orford divorced her in 1963, returning to the Wizarding world with his 8-year-old daughter in tow. Somewhere along the way, Orford also suffered an injury (possibly curse damage) from an unknown source which impaired both his intelligence and his magical ability, but several school friends managed to get him a minor sinecure at the Ministry "overseeing the Ministry house elves," as if they actually need an overseer. Ellen Cracknell died in a Muggle mental institution in 1970, and the squib boy was raised by relatives on his mother's side. There are no records of him after he left Muggle primary school. In 1989, Orford's condition deteriorated to the point that he could no longer maintain even the pretense of employability, and Dolores had him placed in a home in Dorset for indigent elderly witches and wizards who lack the financial resources for either in-house nursing or permanent in-patient status in St. Mungo's. Despite the meagerness of his current circumstances, Orford's continued care takes up a substantial portion of Dolores's Ministry income. I'm told she still visits him regularly.*

*Subject was sorted into Slytherin in 1966 and graduated in 1973 with 7 OWLs and 5 NEWTs: Charms, Magical History, Muggle Studies, Ancient History, and, somewhat surprisingly, DADA, though her only O's were in the two history courses. She then started work in the Ministry*

*Archives while pursuing a Mastery in History of Magic which she abandoned before completion. She eventually obtained a permanent job in the Archives (specifically the Educational Records division) which she held for seventeen years before her recent promotion to Undersecretary.*

*Subject is, to be blunt, a frumpy spinster with only one major romantic involvement I'm aware of. From 1975 to 1976, she was engaged to Jack MacMillan (of the Noble MacMillans, though he's a poor cousin whose family is estranged from the current seat-holders). Three weeks before their marriage date, Jack MacMillan was killed (along with 26 others) in the April 1976 werewolf attack on Diagon Alley. Poor Dolores saw the whole thing, and while she wasn't injured herself, she spent several weeks in the St. Mungo's mental healing ward. Undoubtedly, this experience is the source of one of the two major political affiliations that she has pursued over the last twenty years: Dolores is a dues-paying member of Witches Against Lycanthropic Killers (WALK), a minor advocacy group that agitates for hardline policies against werewolves, regardless of their criminal records or other dark affiliations.*

*Subject's other political affiliation is a bit more provocative. From her Second Year at Hogwarts until the group's dissolution in 1978, Umbridge was an outspoken supporter of the Slytherin Solution Society, which advocated that Magical Britain adopt the so-called Slytherin Solution for how to treat Muggleborns and Muggle-raised Halfbloods like herself. Specifically, they wanted the government to take magical children out of Muggle homes at the first sign of accidental magic, memory-wipe the parents, and foster the magical children out to fully-magical homes. Needless to say, it seems being raised by the mentally ill Ellen Cracknell Umbridge had a powerful impact on young*



*Dolores. I received the Society's newsletter myself for many years, though I was never a full member and never interacted with Umbridge through it. The SSS was shut down in 1978 because its views were considered "Death Eater sympathetic" which was nonsense. The SSS wanted to rescue Mudbloods from their filthy Muggle parents and give them a decent upbringing, not exterminate them like the Death Eaters wanted. Regardless, Umbridge's enthusiastic support for the SSS was a minor black mark on her Ministry record which likely kept her from advancement though she has never been accused of either Death Eater sympathies or even any incidents of blood purism.*

*So that's the official report. Now we get into the realm of rumor and suspicion. You see, I have yet to hear any plausible explanation of how Orford Umbridge managed to suffer nearly-crippling curse damage while living among Muggles with a Muggle wife and family. And here's another thing, when he was a Seventh Year, Orford (a Slytherin) was romantically linked with Ardella Selwyn (of those Selwyns). Shortly after graduation, Orford and Ardella both disappeared from Magical Britain for some time. About two years later, Ardella apparently turned up dead in a Muggle hospital, but the Selwyns hushed up all the details. Then, years later, Orford shows back up with an insane Muggle wife and two kids before getting rid of the wife and the squib child. I wouldn't presume to speculate with anyone but you, deary, but from the timing, it certainly seems possible that Dolores might actually be the child of Orford and Ardella, with the latter dying during childbirth and the former marrying the Muggle to conceal Dolores's parentage from House Selwyn. Or perhaps the truth is even stranger and more horrible. This is the Selwyns we're talking about, after all.*

*If you want me to dig into that cesspit, Rita, we'll need to get together to discuss remuneration. Exploring the Selwyn family history calls for hazard pay, I should think.*

*Eleanor*

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**29 August 1993**

**10:00 a.m.**

**Longbottom Manor**

Harry sat in an overstuffed chair in the Longbottom parlor as he reviewed the letter he'd received from Hogwarts about the new private room assignments, only occasionally glancing over to the fireplace as he waited for Lady Augusta to floo in from the Ministry's International Portkey Station with Neville in tow. The boy bit his lower lip in nervous anticipation – Neville had been one of his closest friends since the very start of his Hogwarts schooling. It was a friendship he'd thought would never die, one so important to Harry that, at the age of eleven, he'd called upon Neville to be his "moral compass," to act as the one person who Harry would listen to if the other boy thought he was approaching some line that should not be crossed. But Theo No-Name had been another of Harry's closest friends and for nearly as long. And despite his considerable skill as a young Occlumens, it tied Harry's stomach in knots to think that Neville would probably hate Theo now, and that he might well hate Harry as well unless Harry went out of his way to reject the other boy.

Suddenly, there was a loud "whoosh" and a gout of green flame that heralded the arrival of Neville and Lady Augusta. Harry did a double-take. Apparently, Africa had been good for Neville. The boy had grown a good three inches, it seemed, and he would probably be the tallest student in

their year. The last of his baby-fat had melted away, replaced by some obvious muscles, and his hair had grown out into a rakish shaggy mop-top that Harry suspected most of the girls in their lass would find adorable. For a second, Neville simply looked at Harry. Then, he stepped forward and pulled Harry into a bear hug.

"I've missed you, Harry," Neville said. "I missed you a lot." Then, he released the hug and stepped back. "I've got a lot to talk about. I want to tell you all about my summer. But you first. Anything exciting happen with you while I was gone."

Harry pasted on his best fake smile as he tried not to think about the collection of Death Eaters locked away two floors below them, three of whom were responsible for brutally torturing Neville's parents to the point of insanity, as well as Professor Snape's recent bombshell that Barty Crouch Jr., the fourth attacker, might still be alive somehow. It was weak evidence, consisting entirely of Rabastan Lestrangle's hazy and distorted memories of a visit by Barty's parents to see him in Azkaban just a day before his death, but it was enough to warrant further investigation.

"Nope," Harry lied effortlessly. "My summer's been completely, 100% boring. Just ... *incredibly* dull."

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### **Meanwhile, outside Grimmauld Place ...**

With the soft sucking sound of twisted space, the Black Brothers apparated into an alley just across from 12 Grimmauld Place. Immediately, Sirius stumbled and Regulus swiftly caught him to stop him falling down.

"I'm alright!" Sirius said irritably even though he was clearly out of breath and leaning heavily on a cane. Regulus

looked at him doubtfully, but when it seemed clear that his older brother was in no danger of collapsing, he let go of Sirius's arm. With a few seconds of concentration, the Metamorphmagus altered his features into his current alias of Mr. Cato and then stepped out of the alley to make certain the area wasn't under surveillance. The house they grew up in might be unplottable, but James Potter apparently knew the general address, and since two members of House Black were among the Azkaban escapees, it was possible that there might be someone from the DMLE charged with monitoring the general area. Regulus certainly *hoped* that wasn't the case, as he and Harry had previously visited the house without any disguises at all, but so far, there had been no signs that they'd been observed.

Today seemed to bear that out, as Regulus saw no signs of wizards on the scene to monitor 12 Grimmauld Place. He returned to the alley and transfigured a nearby empty trashcan into a wheelchair. After a few moments of argument, Sirius grudgingly sat in it and allowed his younger brother to wheel him across the street and into the concealed townhouse.

Inside the foyer, the two stopped in surprise. Sirius hadn't known what to expect (though he certainly expected the worst), but Regulus had been here only a few weeks before and had seen firsthand the terrible shape of the house. He barely recognized it today. Decades of dust and cobwebs were gone, as was the hideous troll-leg umbrella stand. All the light fixtures had been replaced with new ones that were both brighter and more inviting than the ghoulish candelabras their parents favored. The blood-red carpets in the hallway had been removed in favor of brand-new ones in a tasteful creme. The nearly-black mahogany panels on the walls had been stripped and re-varnished with a lighter

and much more inviting stain. Most surprising of all, however, was the fact that most of the wall on the right-hand side of the corridor had been torn down completely, providing an open floor plan for the main parlor which itself had been redecorated into a more modern and welcoming style. Regulus quickly realized that part of the missing wall included the section where Walburga Black's portrait had been hanging during his last visit. As soon as the two made it through the door, Dobby popped into view and stood before them in his little black three-piece suit, his arm clasped behind his back in a respectful pose.

"Good morning, Masters Regulus and Sirius," he said cheerfully. "Welcome back to 12 Grimmauld Place. Dobby hopes that his efforts to prepare the house meet with your satisfaction."

"So far so good," Regulus said. "It's remarkable to see the change after just a few weeks. Thank you for your work, Dobby."

"Didn't there used to be a wall there?" Sirius asked in confusion.

"There was indeed, sir," the house elf replied. "Dobby regrets to say that he was unable to overcome the permanent sticking charm which affixed the portrait of your late mother to the entryway wall. However, upon investigation, Dobby realized that it was not a supporting wall and so it was a simple matter to ... renovate the problem. Madame Walburga's portrait has been moved to the attic along with a five-foot-long section of the original wall that contains it. If you wish to speak with..."

"Sweet Morgana's Tits, NO!" Sirius interrupted.

Regulus frowned at his brother's outburst and then turned his attention back to Dobby. "Your work appears exemplary, Dobby. Is the rest of the house in as good a shape?"

At that, Dobby looked somewhat pained. "Regrettably not, Master Regulus. Dobby has managed to thoroughly clean and repair most of the main floor and most of bedrooms on the second floor, including the same bedrooms that you and Master Sirius used when you resided here and a third bedroom for the Great and Powerful Wizard Harry Potter. However, Dobby is still in the process of cleaning and repairing the rest of the house. In particular, Dobby was hesitant to address the condition of either the basement, the master bedroom suite, or the library without yourselves on hand. The wards and curses on those areas are ... excessive, and Dobby lacked confidence that he could easily bypass them, particularly since Dobby is not truly a Black elf and thus is not fully attuned to this property."

"Couldn't you get Kreacher to help?" Sirius asked gruffly. "Regulus informs me that the little monster is still alive."

Dobby wrinkled his nose slightly. "The Kreacher elf still lives, sir, but Dobby must reluctantly report that for the last few weeks, the Kreacher elf has split his time between hiding in the cupboard under the sink in the kitchen and residing in the attic where he loudly begs forgiveness from the portrait of Madame Black for failing to," Dobby paused and coughed delicately, "*protect the house from infestation by blood traitors*, as he puts it. Regardless of his current location, he is usually to be found intoxicated on butterbeer and thus of little aid to Dobby."

Regulus crooked an eyebrow. He remembered Dobby from their encounter in the Prince's Lair, and the transformation of that cringing little thing into the hypercompetent elf

before him was in some ways more impressive than what Dobby had achieved with the house.

"That's alright, Dobby. Leave Kreacher to his own affairs for the time being."

"Unless you find him doing something he shouldn't," Sirius interjected almost merrily. "In that case, you've got my permission to kick his little arse."

Dobby nodded as if accepting that order while Regulus shook his head. "Sirius, I'll remind you that Kreacher is *my* house elf."

"I'm sorry. *Who* is the current Lord Black?" Sirius replied smugly.

Regulus rolled his eyes, as Dobby came forward to take control of Sirius's wheelchair. "With your permissions, sirs, Dobby will now escort you to Master Sirius's rooms. Dobby has already retrieved your prescribed potions from the Tonks Clinic. They are waiting for you upstairs." He hesitated. "While Dobby took the liberty of renovating the house where it seemed warranted, he has made no changes to your bedrooms beyond cleaning and replacing linens. Accordingly, the prior wall decorations are still in place, including those of a ... scandalous nature."

"It's alright, Dobby," Regulus said with a long-suffering sigh. "I'm sure Sirius is thrilled that his Farrah Fawcett posters are still in place."

"How the hell do you know who Farrah Fawcett is?" Sirius asked in surprise. "Or was? I have no idea whether she's still alive."

"She was last I'd heard," Regulus replied. "And I believe I'd mentioned that I spent quite a long time in the Muggle world, Sirius."

"Yes, but with no details, Little Brother. Since we'll be cooped up here in Hell House for a few days at least, I look forward to hearing all about your Muggle adventures. I'm sure they're hilarious."

Minutes later, Sirius was laying comfortably in his old bed in a room practically coated in Gryffindor crimson save for a few twenty-year-old posters of various scantily clad Muggle pin-up girls plus an equal number of posters depicting various Muggle motor bikes. Regulus was honestly surprised. He had not been in this room since before Sirius left. After their mother had blasted Sirius off the family tapestry, he'd assumed that she would scour this room down to the floorboards and sheet rock, but apparently she'd simply locked it up and forgotten about it instead. He summoned a chair from downstairs and sat down next to the bed.

And once seated, Regulus realized he had no idea what to say. He did *not* want to discuss everything he'd been up to since fleeing Britain – way too many scabbed memories there to allow Sirius the chance to pick at them – but he was at a loss for what he could talk to Sirius about as a diversion. "*Say, I hear you've been in Azkaban for a decade or so. How was it?*" He decided to go for something safer. Marginally.

"So ... Dobby said that Mother's portrait was in the attic now. Do you want to see her at some point? Not now, I suppose, but later perhaps?"

The *look* Sirius gave him made Regulus flinch.



"I'd sooner poke my head up a nundu's arse. But you go ahead, Regulus. You were always *Mummy's favorite*."

"Not any more," Regulus said with a dry laugh. "I spoke with her portrait the night I came here to destroy the locket. She now considers me to be as much a blood traitor as you."

Sirius did a double-take. After a few seconds though, he regrouped. "Well, look on the bright side. At least she didn't live long enough to Crucio you."

"I know," Regulus said quietly. "I remember that night."

The older brother looked away and blushed slightly. "Did she ... how did they treat you? You know, after I left?"

"Okay, mostly. Soon after you departed, Grandfather Arcturus summoned us to Chevenoir to ... well, discuss it isn't the right word. But he pretty much terrified Mother and Father out of doing anything to me. He also forbade them both from trying to harm you any further. It's the only time I can remember seeing either of them frightened." Regulus paused. "That was also the night he told me about the Codex. How, um, how old were you when he ...?"

"Eleven," Sirius said with some bitterness. "When I came home for Christmas break. I had nightmares for weeks and couldn't talk to anyone about it. Not that I'd have said anything to Mother and Father. I imagine they'd have tortured me for information about forbidden magic to give to You-Know-Who if they'd known."

Regulus sat quietly for a moment before speaking again. "Sirius ... when you spoke with Grandfather about the Anathema Codex ... did he ... did he tell you anything about ... Mother and Father?"

Sirius looked at him crossly. "Tell me what? That they were a pair of psychotics? I'd known that since I was four."

"Yes, but did he tell you ... why? About what he'd done to them?"

Sirius just looked at him in confusion. Regulus sighed and then took a deep breath before starting.

"Alright, we'll try this another way. Have you ever heard of a group called the Order of the Unbroken Chain?" Sirius's expression indicated he had not. "It's obscure knowledge. The Unbroken Chain was a hard-core blood purist group – or perhaps *cult* would be more accurate – that operated in the mid-18th century until the Ministry shut them down. They represented the worst parts of Death Eater views on blood supremacy dialed up to 11."

At that last comment, Sirius looked outright perplexed, and Regulus realized to his surprise he'd actually used a Muggle expression that his Muggle-loving brother didn't know. "*Oh yeah,*" he thought. "*Sirius was in Azkaban when Spinal Tap came out. I wonder if we can get a VCR in this house without it bursting into flames.*"

"Never mind," he said aloud. "Let's just say they were *really* extremist about blood purity. So much so in fact that they didn't want their children breeding outside their extended families. At all."

Sirius shuddered at the implications. "Okay, gross. But what does that have ... to do ... with..." He paused and gave a look of disgust. "Oh no. Don't tell me."

Regulus nodded. "Mother's precious family tree had some inaccuracies. She and Father were actually *first cousins*, a relationship that while barely legal in some Muggle cultures

should have prevented the two of them from getting married because it's close enough to interfere with the magical potential of children. Which, apparently, it did." He paused. "Did you know that we both have, or rather had, an older brother?"

Sirius shook his head silently, his eyes wide.

"According to Grandfather, his name was Polaris Black. He was born a few years before you, severely deformed and mentally ill. Grandfather was ... *evasive* on what happened to him. But his birth revealed the truth of Mother's ancestry. And so, to prevent scandal and ensure that he had at least one viable grandchild to inherit the Lordship, Grandfather forced our parents to take a potion called the Morgause Philtre that had been used by the members of the Unbroken Chain to prevent the effects of inbreeding. Children born under the effects of this potion will be perfectly healthy and usually above-average in magical potential ... but the parents would be cursed somehow. With our parents, the curse took the form of insanity."

Sirius stared at his younger brother for what felt like an eternity. Then, he called out. "Dobby!"

Instantly, Harry's elf who had been temporarily seconded to House Black appeared. "You called, Master Sirius, sir?"

"Yeah, be a pal and fetch us a two bottles of butterbeer from wherever Kreacher's been hiding it." Dobby nodded and popped out. Sirius turned back to Regulus.

"Honestly, I'd ask for firewhisky if I wasn't on medication. Why ... why would you even tell me all that?" Sirius asked almost reproachfully.

Regulus shrugged. "I know it will be hard for you to be stuck here where you have so many bad memories. I thought maybe if you knew the truth, well, you might not be able to forgive Mother and Father, but you could at least ... understand them, maybe?"

Sirius said nothing. When Dobby returned with two butterbeers on a silver platter along with Sirius's afternoon potion, both brothers were silent still.

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### ***Meanwhile ...***

The aurors who greeted Buck MacMillan were somewhat surprised at the wizard who arrived at the Ministry's International Portkey Arrival Station. They had been told to greet a foreign dignitary at his arrival and conduct him to the Leaky Cauldron to freshen up (and recover from taking a portkey from the opposite side of the globe). They *had not* been told that said "dignitary" would arrive not only dressed as a Muggle, but apparently as a Muggle cowboy complete with jeans, boots, a sheepskin coat, and a cowboy hat.

Auror Proudfoot stepped forward to greet the new arrival. "Mr. MacMillan, welcome to London. On behalf..." was as far as he got before Buck held up a hand to silence him before calmly walking past him to the admissions desk where he spent nearly twenty seconds vomiting into a trash can before pulling a red handkerchief out of his back pocket and wiping his mouth.

"Blimey," he finally said. "That was a helluva trip!" He looked around the roomful of shocked aurors before pulling out his wand and scourgifying the contents of the trash can.

"I don't suppose there's any chance that one of you blokes is carrying some breath mints, is there?"

An hour later, Buck had finally been checked into a room at the Leaky Cauldron where he took a moment to brush his teeth before allowing his escorts to convey him to St. Mungo's. Once there, it took only a few minutes of examining the addle-minded Gilderoy Lockhart to confirm his condition.

"Yep. That's Tabula Rasa, alright."

"You're sure, Auror MacMillan?" James Potter asked. Beside him were Aurors Shacklebolt and Proudfoot (the latter of whom still regarded the Australian dubiously).

"I'm not an auror anymore, Chief Potter," Buck replied. "I'm retired now. But I'm not so long gone from service that I don't recognize the signs of Tabula Rasa. Part of my job was confirming that the spell had taken hold after using it on someone sentenced to personality death."

James nodded. "So how did Gilderoy Lockhart learn it?"

"Well, if I had to guess, I'd say the Imperius Curse. Somebody who knew the Tabula Rasa used the Imperius on Lockhart and then had him permanently Obliviate himself." Buck glanced over at the youngest auror who seemed doubtful about his theory. "I assume you know that if you put someone under the Imperius, he can perform most any spell you know so long as it's at your command. The whole point of the nasty bugger is that it allows you to use your victim as a conduit for your will."

"Of course," said James, although Proudfoot's expression suggested it was news to him. "But it still needs to be

someone who knows Tabula Rasa in the first place. Could it be an ex-auror from Australia?"

Buck looked back at Lockhart as he considered the question (which had the benefit of allowing him to avoid eye contact with the three British Aurors, just in case). "Nah," he finally said. "Every Australian auror who learns the spell has to swear an oath never to use it except in the performance of his duties. That includes even teaching it to someone who hasn't taken the oath. Even if one of our guys had gone bad enough to use an Imperius, he'd have lost his magic if he used Tabula Rasa on someone without a court-ordered Writ of Personality Death."

Then, he shrugged. "Still, at the end of the day, Tabula Rasa is just a charm. Once somebody puzzled out the arithmancy and runic patterns that allow it to be cast in the first place, it was only a matter of time before someone else reverse-engineered it."

"Can the personality wipe be reversed?" Shacklebolt inquired.

"No," Buck answered shaking his head. "The whole point of the thing was to provide a humane alternative to the death penalty so that wizards and witches could be spared the effects of acting as executioner. Since only the worst of the worst are supposed to suffer personality death, the Australian government has never been very interested in a cure. In fact, the design of Tabula Rasa was intended to be as permanent as we could make it."

Proudfoot frowned. "So there's no way it could be an Australian auror?"

"Absolutely not," Buck lied. After all, he was the one who exploited a somewhat egregious loophole to teach the

Tabula Rasa to someone for whom the oath didn't take because he was swearing it under a false identity. Someone who Buck planned to have words with very soon. In the meantime, however, the group returned to James's office so that the Chief Auror could go over the case with his Australian visitor.

"So to sum up," Potter said, "we now think that someone spent most of the past year, if not longer, masquerading as Gilderoy Lockhart for the purpose of infiltrating Hogwarts. Most likely a Metamorphmagus but possibly someone using Polyjuice Potion for an extended period of time. That last theory seems unlikely to me. I can't imagine someone getting away with using a potion that had to be retaken constantly for the better part of a year and would have required them to keep the real Lockhart on hand the whole time to provide hair samples. It's theoretically possible but absurdly unlikely, I think."

James paused diplomatically. "Mr. MacMillan, I've reviewed your own personnel file that the Australian DMLE sent over. I know that Lazarus White was your son-in-law. I don't know if you've been informed yet since you're retired now but ... as part of Lockhart's confession, he claimed to have killed Lazarus White and disposed of his body somewhere in the Outback so that he could take credit for Auror White's work in taking down the Wagga Wagga werewolf pack. Obviously, we have no way to confirm that since Lockhart has no memories and, as you said, was likely under the Imperius when he confessed, but we have forwarded the rest of his confession to other DMLEs in jurisdictions he mentioned to compare with old case files. Everything up to the part about Auror White checks out. Lockhart did make it a practice to obliviate wizards and witches who had vanquished local monsters or dark wizards so that he could take credit for their good work. He claimed that he tried to do the same to

your son-in-law who fought back, and Lockhart accidentally killed him. We have no reason to doubt that part of his confession either. I'm sorry, but I'm afraid your son-in-law is almost certainly dead."

Buck lowered his head and wiped his eyes, doing his best to convincingly fake grief. "Thank you, Chief Potter. I had resigned myself to losing Rusty many years ago, but it's still good to have closure."

"You're certainly welcome. While you're here, would you mind looking at some sketches we have of two possible suspects? It's a longshot, and as you said, it's possible that whoever was posing as Lockhart learned the Tabula Rasa from some other means, but I have to follow every lead I can at this point." With that, Potter pulled two artist sketches out of a file folder.

"These two people appear to be involved in the case in some capacity. The male calls himself Mr. Cato, and he supposedly was Gilderoy Lockhart's manservant and the inheritor of most of his wealth. The female called herself Maria Gambrelli, and she ... well, to be blunt, she seduced one of our aurors so that she could steal hairs from him for Polyjuice Potion."

Buck studied the two pictures and struggled not to bark out a laugh. "*I swear, Rusty,*" he thought. "*I'm going to kick your silly arse for this.*" He thought for a moment about how to proceed before answering.

"Well, I can't rightly say I've met them, but I can tell you who they are and where you need to be lookin'. The woman is a Muggle actress I think by the name of Elke Sommer, though she's a good bit older now than in this picture. I can't remember the name of the Chinese fella, but he's also



a Muggle actor. They were both in a movie from nearly thirty or so years ago called *A Shot In The Dark*. And since most British wizards I've met have never been in a Muggle movie theater in their lives, I think that should tell you who to look for."

He gave Potter what he hoped was a triumphant look. "*Muggleborns!* You're looking for a group of Muggleborns. They're the only ones who might have seen the movie these two actors appeared in together. From America, I reckon. I mean, if they're really Metamorphmagi, there's no way they could be Brits what with the Conscription Act, am I right? But with the situation in America, it would be easy for Metamorphmagic to hide themselves."

And that was true. While the Muggle U.S. government represented the whole nation, Magical America was broken up into several competing government entities separated by fairly porous borders: MACUSA on the Eastern Seaboard, the Confederation of Wizards that pretended to control everything from the Mississippi River to the Pacific, and the Free States of Las Vegas, Chicago and Los Angeles, plus Merlin knew how many small cabals of unaffiliated hedge wizards and witches holed up in towns so small that the ICW had never even heard of them.

Potter nodded thoughtfully at that. "That's true. But why would American Muggle-born wizards want to break Death Eaters out of Azkaban?"

Buck shrugged. "Who can tell with the Americans? To gain access to dark magic from You-Know-Who's stash, maybe? Or perhaps revenge of relatives murdered by Death Eaters?"

"Well, maybe Mr. Cato can tell us. Now that we know he's probably a shapeshifter too, it's time we brought him in for questioning." James rose from his desk to send out a squad of aurors.

"No doubt," Buck said as he distractedly waved away a small bug that had been fluttering around his face. "And, um, while your taking care of your business, I need to take care of mine, so to speak. Can you direct me to the nearest loo?"

James laughed. "Certainly. It's down the corridor. First door on the left."

Buck thanked Potter for the direction and made his way to the men's inside, he checked to make sure he was alone before locking the door. Then, he pulled out his wand and pointed it at the floor, his face a mask of pure annoyance. "**EXPECTO PATRONUM**," he whispered angrily.

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### ***Back at Grimmauld Place ...***

The two Black brothers had been sipping butterbeers without talking for several minutes while Sirius absorbed Reg's revelation about their parents. Finally, the silence grew too oppressive for his younger sibling.

"Speaking of horrible family secrets," he said with exaggerated lightness, "Severus Snape mentioned that you tried to kill him when you were at school together. I don't suppose that's just a silly exaggeration on his part, it it?."

Sirius took another sip of beer while avoiding eye contact. "What did he say?" he asked in a low voice.

"That you tried to murder him in cold-blood at some point in the autumn of 1976. He said oaths he'd been forced to swear prevent him from saying anything more."

The elder brother barked out a laugh but still wouldn't make eye contact with his sibling. "He's exaggerating. It was ... it was just a silly prank that went wrong. He was never in any danger. And he'd have deserved it if he had gotten hurt or killed, the filthy snake."

"Sirius ...?"

"I've answered your question, Regulus. I do not wish to discuss Snivellus or his accusations anymore. Am I understood?"

Regulus paused with his mouth still open, surprised at his brother's forcefulness. "As you wish ... Lord Black."

Sirius snorted again and took another swig of beer. Silence reigned once more for a long moment before he spoke again.

"So how the hell did you become an Metamorphmagus at seven without me ever finding out?" he asked, changing the subject.

Regulus smiled bitterly. "As I recall, you *did* find out. Several times, in fact, over the years. And then Mother or Father would Oblivate you of the knowledge. That's why they never allowed you to take a Remembrall to school with you."

Sirius finally looked up at him with a shocked and somewhat hurt expression, but Regulus merely shrugged. It wasn't like he'd had any say in the matter.

"I've handled Remembrall's since then, though," Sirius objected.

"Over time, false memories blend in among true ones perfectly, especially if the alterations are well-crafted and the target had weak mental defenses. I think you were around ten or eleven the last time you had any knowledge of my powers, and you probably never handled a Remembrall until you were in the auror program or later. Typically, only the top-of-the-line Remembralls have any chance of detecting a false or erased memory more than seven years old, give or take depending on the skill of the wizard altering the memories, the age of the target, and the nature of the memories being altered."

"Uh-huh. But I think I'd know if our loving parents had Obliviated me on a daily basis. How could you have gotten training without my seeing the signs regularly?"

"Do you remember all those times I got shipped off to Aunt Cassiopeia for 'deportment lessons'? Like Aunt Cassie was the sort of person who had any business teaching *deportment*?" he said with a laugh.

"So Auntie Cassie was a Metamorphmagus too? Whatever happened to her?"

"Death, most likely. By which I mean I read her obituary back in '92 and that's when the tapestry says she died. But I faked my death so there's no reason she couldn't as well. When I last saw her the summer before I started Hogwarts, she was planning on moving to Marseilles to live as a man for a few years."

Sirius did a double-take. "Live ... as a man? You can do that? Change gender?"

"Yes. In fact, Auntie Cassie insisted that I learn the contraceptive charms for both men and women because it's apparently possible for a male Metamorphmagus to get pregnant if he has sex with another man while in possession of female anatomy." He grimaced. "Auntie Cassie indicated that such pregnancies ... didn't turn out well."

Sirius leaned forward and grinned. "So have you ... you know? As a woman?"

"What are you, *twelve*?" Regulus said irritably. He looked away for a few seconds before turning back to meet his amused brother's gaze. "Alright, yes! When I was younger, I ... experimented. And what I learned from those experiments is that I am firmly heterosexual. I have nothing against anyone with different orientations, and I am perfectly capable of transforming into a woman and even seducing a man in that form, a skill helped get you out of Azkaban, I might add. However, I am only sexually attracted to women."

Sirius fought back a snigger, and Regulus gave him a sour look. "And anyway, dear brother," he continued, "it's not like you have room to be judgmental. As I recall, after Marlene McKinnon dumped you, you basically turned into a, oh what was the term that Father used? Ah yes - *pansexual libertine*."

At that, Sirius's smile faded instantly and his expression darkened. Immediately, Regulus realized that he'd crossed some line but had no idea what it was. After a few seconds, Sirius spoke again but in a colder voice.

"So, since you could look like whoever you wanted, did you ever find a face that could get you someone worth keeping?"

Regulus's own expression darkened at that. "I got married, if that's what you mean, Sirius. I was married for nearly four years. And had a son."

"Well what happened to them? Surely you didn't walk out of a wife and child to live the high-life as Gilderoy Lock...?"

"They died," Regulus interrupted swiftly. He didn't sound sad or angry. His voice was just ... flat. "They were both killed in a werewolf attack in 1985. I got there in time to hold my wife in my arms as she passed. Does that answer your question?"

Sirius looked as though he'd been slapped, and he felt as though he deserved to be. "Oh, Reg. I'm ... I'm so sorry. I didn't think..."

"It's okay, Sirius," Regulus replied in a soft voice. "It will be ten years next April. I realized pretty quick that I had to move on or else I would just wither away until there was nothing left. I chose the former. The past is ... in the past."

It was an ironic statement on Regulus's part, for at that exact second, a large Patronus in the form of a Flemish Giant Rabbit appeared on Sirius's bed, causing his older brother to give out an embarrassing yelp. The Patronus stared at Reg almost angrily before it finally spoke to him in a deep baritone voice with an Australian accent.

"Burn the Cato identity. Now! It's been made by the British aurors. And then, come see me tonight at the Leaky Cauldron, Room 4 at 10 o'clock. *And for Merlin's sake, **try** to be discreet for once in your miserable Pureblood idiot life!*"

Then, the enormous rabbit faded from view, and a shocked Sirius turned to his brother. "What the hell was *that*?!"

Regulus quickly rose from his chair and pulled out his wand. "Would you believe it was my father-in-law? Dobby!"

The house elf appeared at once. "Dobby," Reg continued. "I need to leave for several hours. In fact, I may not be back until late tonight. Please make sure my brother takes all his potions and that Kreacher ... well, that Kreacher stays the hell away from him."

"Reg, what's going on?" Sirius asked excitedly. "And for the record, I don't need a babysitter or a bodyguard!"

"You need both, brother mine. Your potions will keep you unconscious for several hours, and you're trapped in Grimmauld Place with a possibly deranged house elf who considers you a blood traitor."

"Begging Master Regulus's pardon," Dobby interrupted. "But Dobby seeks clarification. If the Kreacher elf becomes difficult, is Master Regulus authorizing Dobby to use lethal countermeasures."

At that, Regulus's eyes bulged out of his head, and he turned to look at Sirius whose own mouth was hanging open at Dobby's question. It was not the sort of language either of them had *ever* heard from a house elf.

"Um," Regulus finally said, "let's *try* not to kill Kreacher unless all other tactics fail."

"As you wish, sir," Dobby said with a bow.

Regulus shook his head and darted out of the room, ignoring Sirius's questions as he went. Once outside, and after checking to make sure he was unobserved, he apparated straight to Mr. Cato's room at the Novatel London Waterloo. There, he swiftly banished all of his

Muggle clothing and possessions to his room at Grimmauld Place and then pocketed his Gringotts key, though he wasn't terribly worried about the aurors tracking his finances. He'd already converted all of Gilderoy Lockhart's remaining financial assets into British pounds ... followed by Italian lira, German deutsche marks, and finally American dollars before converting them back into galleons and depositing them into Regulus's personal Gringotts account. That left only the products of his time spent as Professor Lockhart of Hogwarts: his polyjuice potions, George Weasley's portkey notes, and all the rest, all of which he placed into a trunk which he shrank down and pocketed. With all signs of Mr. Cato's presence eliminated, Regulus prepared to apparate back to Grimmauld Place.

Just in time to feel the anti-apparation wards fall into place.

"Shit," Regulus said to himself in a moment of understatement.

Minutes later, a squad of five aurors led by James Potter made their way off the elevators and through the stairwell doors to converge on Cato's room. Along the way, they passed an older foreign-looking woman in a maid's uniform pushing a cleaning supply cart down the hall. They nodded to her as they passed, and she muttered something in reply that sounded Polish. Soon, they took up position on either side of the hotel room. There were wards on the door, but the aurors didn't bother to disable them, opting instead to put up a silencing ward and a Muggle-Repelling Charm before simply blasting the door off its hinges. The six wizards rushed inside to find a shocking surprise: the same hotel maid they had just passed lying unconscious on the bed. Cursing loudly, Potter directed his men back the way they came in pursuit of the woman who was apparently their Metamorphmagus quarry in disguise. They found the



cleaning cart next to an open stairwell door, and Potter could hear another door up above opening onto the roof level. He and the aurors pursued.

Once out on the roof, they were witness to an unexpected and remarkable sight; a short elderly Asian man who a Muggle might have recognized as famed character actor Burt Kwouk ... and who was wearing a maid's dress whilst waving a wand around to examine the anti-apparation wards. As the aurors emerged, Mr. Cato (who was obviously more spry than he looked), dove behind a ventilation unit, dodging spellfire as he did.

"Give it up, Cato or whoever you really are!" James yelled. "The anti-apparation and anti-portkey wards extend for thirty feet in every direction! There's no way out!"

From behind his cover, Regulus grinned. "*Thanks for the information, Potter,*" he thought to himself. Then, he swiftly poked his head and wand over the top of the unit. "**AVIS OPPUGNO!**" Instantly, a flock of ravens erupted from his wand to attack and harry the aurors, none of whom could get a clear shot off through the attacking birds. While the aurors tried to counter his spell, Regulus jumped up and sprinted towards the edge of the roof as fast as he could, and at the edge, he leaped over with all his might. After he'd fallen about twenty feet, he twisted his body around to face the hotel and pointed his wand straight at it. "**VENTUS MAXIMUS!**" In response, a powerful jet of air shot forth from his wand to strike the building. And as he'd intended, the reverse thrust propelled him away from the building even as he continued falling.

James fought his way through the flock of attacking ravens and reached the edge just in time to see Mr. Cato, still in a dress, blasting away from the hotel. He tried to fire a spell

off, but before he could, the other wizard passed through the wards and instantly apparated away, leaving a furious Chief Auror behind.

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### ***Later that night at the Leaky Cauldron...***

There was a soft knock on the door to Buck MacMillen's room. He opened the door to find a nondescript man in simple wizarding attire. Without any questions, the man ducked into the room, and Buck shut and warded the door behind him. He turned towards his guest with his wand still in his hand.

"Well?" he said irritably.

At that, Regulus concentrated and then shifted into the Lazarus White face he'd not worn in nearly a decade.

Buck snorted. "I'm surprised you didn't show up lookin' like Peter bloody Sellers."

Then, he took two steps forward and *punched his son-in-law in the jaw!* As Regulus staggered back, Buck also claimed his wand with a wordless Expelliarmus.

"OWW! What the hell, Buck!" Regulus hissed, spitting out blood from his split lip.

"*That* is for using Tabula Rasa without proper authorization," Buck said as he pocketed the other man's wand. "Now, I'm giving you exactly one minute to explain to me *why* you used Tabula Rasa on that Lockhart bloke before I either punch you again, drag you down to the DMLE, or *both*."

Fifty-five seconds later, Buck grudgingly handed back Regulus's wand while he absorbed what he'd been told. Horcruxes, a seemingly immortal dark lord, and a petrifying basilisk running amok in a school! He thought it was incredible but it all seemed true. For his part, Regulus was surprised that Buck knew what a horcrux was and that his own oaths even allowed him to discuss the matter with the older man. But in the years since Rusty White had left Australia, Buck had risen high in the Australian DMLE before his retirement. He had never served as Chief Auror, but he *had* been awarded what he described as level 13 clearance, which meant he had been given a general briefing on the Anathema Codex and its contents by agents of Division 13, the clandestine government organization that served the same function in Australia that the Unspeakables did in the U.K.

"I've never heard of Division 13," Rusty/Regulus said.

"Neither had I until they came calling because of an exceptionally weird case I can't talk about. But I helped them solve it, and in exchange, I got cleared to know about your weird evil book and the weird evil spells in it." With that, he healed the other man's split lip. "And now that we've got the formalities out of the way ..." Buck stepped forward again, this time to pull Regulus into a bear hug which the other man was happy to return.

"I've missed you, Buck."

"And I you, son. Now, sit down and tell me what the hell you've been up to all this time."

The two men talked until after midnight over cheap Australian beer that Buck had brought with him just for this occasion. Regulus briefed Buck on the true adventures that

got fictionalized in Lockhart's books while Buck filled Regulus in both on everything that had happened with all his former friends in Australia and also with what he'd learned so far of James Potter's investigation. He agreed to stay in London as long as he plausibly could to spy on the auror investigation and divert it away from Regulus wherever possible.

At around 1:00 a.m., Regulus apparated back to Grimmauld Place, where Dobby was pleased to inform him that both Sirius and Kreacher were still alive.

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***King's Cross Station***  
***1 September 1993 at 8:30 a.m.***

The new school year had come at last, with Harry, Neville, and Lady Augusta traveling by floo to Diagon Alley and then taking a Muggle taxi to King's Cross Station. Since his return to Britain, Neville had been in a much better mood than when he left, though Harry had been extremely cautious to completely avoid the topic of Theo No-Name. Instead, he spent the few days before the Hogwarts Express peppering Neville about his experiences in Africa. To Harry's surprise, his friend had learned a great deal of theory about the Animagus transformation. Instead of practically criminalizing it as Wizarding Britain had done, the wizards of Africa placed a strong emphasis on all forms of self-transfiguration. Uagadou, Africa's preeminent school of magic, actually offered Animagus training as a popular elective, and Neville had been told that supposedly almost half of all African wizards and witches were Animagi (compared to the five or so out of the entire British population who voluntarily registered over the last century). This included several wizards who worked on his family's magical farms in Africa, many of whom he'd gotten

to know and befriend. They had even offered to give him Animagus instruction, but he demurred due to British attitudes towards the gift.

Oh, and he'd also survived a nundu attack on the farm during his stay, though Neville asked Harry to not share that detail with his grandmother. Once he got over his shock, Harry agreed.

Unfortunately, Neville's mood wouldn't last. Almost as soon as the trio had passed through the barrier, Neville tensed up, and his face assumed an angry expression that Harry barely recognized on his normally affable friend. He soon realized why: further down the platform, a group of students were gathered around Theo Nott. To Harry's surprise, several seemed to be interceding on his behalf against a larger group that had accosted him. For just a moment, the crowd parted just enough for Harry and Theo to see each other clearly. Harry inclined his head slightly in a way that said "*Need some help?*" Theo responded with a barely perceptible shake of his own head that meant he did not want Harry involved. Harry gave the slightest of nods in return and then turned to Neville.

"Come on. Let's get on the train and find a compartment." The two boys headed for the train without looking back at Theo No-Name.

As for Theo himself, moments earlier, he had been surprised at the tense situation in which he found himself.

Inexplicably, it was actually a law of the Wizengamot that all children attending Hogwarts must ride on the Hogwarts Express, which meant that Theo and dozens of other children who already lived in Scotland nevertheless had to travel all the way to King's Cross in order to spend six hours on a train riding back. Accordingly, Nymphadora had

apparated him and his luggage to the station before accompanying him through the portal. Once on the other side, she gave the boy a hug and then left him to board the train while she went to speak to some of the aurors on the platform. While she'd been aware that there would be a DMLE presence on the platform today, even she was surprised by the presence of a dozen aurors ... and one Dementor at the far end of the platform held in check by two aurors and their respective Patronuses. Somewhat oddly, everyone on the platform seemed intent on simply ignoring the Dementor except for its guards, but for some reason, Harry paused at the steps leading onto the train to look back at the hideous creature. And to Harry's surprise, the Dementor *seemed to look straight back at him!* Shaken, Harry hurried onto the train.

Unfortunately, Theo had no opportunity to observe that bit of oddness because as soon as Tonks had moved away, he had immediately been confronted by the Pureblood welcoming committee. Theo had expected a confrontation at some point with Warrington, Parkinson, Crabbe, and Goyle, but he was surprised and somewhat shaken by the cross-section of Purebloods from other Houses that joined them. Zacharias Smith, Hannah Abbot, Ernie MacMillan, Cedric Diggory, and an extremely uncomfortable looking Justin Finch-Fletchley from Hufflepuff. Cho Chang, Roger Davies, and Marietta Edgecombe from Ravenclaw. Oliver Wood, Lavender Brown, and (naturally) Cormac McLaggen from Gryffindor. Plus others that Theo didn't even know. There were nearly two dozen in all, and Theo thought they made a daunting presence.

"Can I help you?" Theo asked mildly.

Cho Chang nudged Roger Davies who stepped forward. Apparently, they had not decided on who would be the

group's spokeswizard beforehand. "*Harry would have planned this better,*" Theo thought idly. "*Whatever this is.*"

Davies coughed to clear his throat and stepped forward. "We do not wish for help or anything else from you, Mr. No-Name. That is why we are here. It perhaps would have been better if you'd had the option of going to some other school. Maybe something will change and that will be possible later. Durmstrang might be a good fit for you."

Crabbe and Pansy laughed at that, but no one else did. By this time, a crowd of students from all Years (along with some parents) was gathering around to observe the proceedings. Suddenly, Theo began to regret communicating to Harry that he should move along and not intervene. The boy didn't want any of the people who were still friends to get caught up in the effects of the Sanction. But now, he realized that this was the largest group of people whose hostility had been triggered the Sanction that he'd been around at one time, and suddenly, a potential riot seemed a real possibility. He started looking around for the nearest auror in case things got hairy, but they all seemed more focused on their fear of Death Eaters flying down from the skies to attack while ignoring a potential lynch mob in the making.

"Regardless," continued Davies pompously, "on behalf of the entire Hogwarts student body, we are here to inform you that *you are not welcome*. Not among us. Not among any of our houses. Not among any decent people at Hogwarts. Stick to yourself. Or you'll be *made* to stick to yourself."

"What's that, Davies?" said someone else who was pushing his way through the crowd. It was an angry Bobby Lattimer. "*On behalf of the entire Hogwarts student body?! Did I hear that right? One would think that if it involved the entire*

*Hogwarts student body*, then perhaps *the Head Boy might have been notified*." With that, Lattimer scanned the group, and he frowned at the Hufflepuff contingent.

"I suppose I might have expected this from Smith. But *even you, Prefect Diggory*?" he said accusingly.

Cedric blushed and suddenly looked uncomfortable with the situation, but then Cho Chang nudged him as if to provide moral support.

"Look, Bobby," he said almost apologetically. "I'm sorry it has to be this way. But it's got to be done."

"But why, Cedric?" implored an anxious-looking Susan Bones from the edge of the onlookers. Although a Pureblood, she was protected by the same magical protection that shielded her guardian, DMLE Director Amelia Bones, and she was horrified by how her fellow Hufflepuffs were acting. "Why does *it* have to be done? And what even is *it* anyway? Other than an angry mob frightening a thirteen-year-old boy for no reason!"

"But there *is* a reason!" exclaimed Pansy Parkinson. "He's an *outcast*. He shouldn't be in our world. He's ... unclean. Why, he's even worse than a Mud...!"

"Don't. Finish. That. Sentence!" Sue Li snarled at the bigoted Pureblood. Pansy actually flinched at the Ravenclaw girl's hostility. But before she could respond, another student stepped forward.

"I'm sorry," Anthony Goldstein said amiably. "I wanted to make sure I heard that right. You said Theo No-Name is ... *unclean*. I mean, all that's happened is that his father put some spell on him, and now you all say he's *unclean*. Really?!"



"Anthony, please," said Ernie MacMillan. "You're a Halfblood. It's not something you'd understand." At that, many of the Halfbloods present took offense, but MacMillan was oblivious to them.

"Oh, I think we all understand just fine, actually," Kevin Entwhistle said ominously as he moved to stand next to his friend Anthony and also next to a surprised Theo. Several other Halfbloods and Muggleborn in the crowd also moved closer, and Theo's "welcoming party" suddenly began to feel outnumbered.

"Why do you even care?" said Lavender Brown. "In addition to being an outcast, he's also a *Slytherin*!" Then, she quickly turned to Pansy. "No offense," she said apologetically, but Pansy just glared at her.

"First they came for the Slytherin outcast," Anthony recited, "but I said nothing because I wasn't a Slytherin outcast. Then, they came for the Hufflepuff Muggleborn, but I said nothing because I wasn't a Hufflepuff Muggleborn. I know how that story ends. A lot of us do, actually."

"I have *no idea* what you're gabbing about Goldstein," spat Cormac McCleggan.

"It's a riff on a famous poem by a Muggle named Niemöller," Anthony said in a strangely tight voice. Sue Li suddenly looked at him with concern. She knew what it meant when her friend got into a mood like his current one.

"My grandfather, Hershel Goldstein, taught me the original version when I was younger. He and my nana, Rachel Goldstein, are just Muggles so I doubt their wisdom would mean much to any of you esteemed people. But they've always given me a lot to think about." He smiled suddenly, and an odd gleam came into his eyes as he surveyed the

Purebloods who had accosted Theo. "Wonderful couple, my Grandpa and Nana Goldstein. Do you know they've been together for fifty years now? They met on a train in 1943, and they've stayed together ever since."

"Yes, yes," drawled a bored Pansy Parkinson. "It sounds very romantic."

"Oh *no*, Miss Parkinson. No, no, no!" Anthony replied with seeming amusement as the gleam in his eyes grew more and more intense. "It wasn't *the least bit* romantic. You see, the train in question was on its way to *Dachau*."

It was not a true silence that fell on the scene, for it was still a busy train station full of people. Nevertheless, a frisson of shock and confusion passed through all those who heard the boy and understood his meaning. Sue Li gasped and put her hand over her mouth, while Kevin's head snapped around to look at Anthony in shock. Neither had ever known that their Ravenclaw friend was just two generations removed from concentration camp survivors. Justin Finch-Fletchley closed his eyes and pinched the brow of his nose with his fingers, his discomfort at getting dragged into the group of students who came to bully Theo increasing exponentially. The rest of the Muggleborn and Muggle-raised alike were stunned both the boy's comment and its significance to the present scene. The Purebloods, on the other hand, simply looked around in bafflement, both at Anthony Goldstein's words and everyone else's reaction to them.

"I'm ... sorry, Mr. Goldstein," said Cedric Diggory hesitantly. "I'm afraid I don't know what that means."

Anthony's smile grew colder, almost turning into a sneer. "Of course you don't, Mr. Diggory. *You're a Pureblood!*" And

with that, he turned and put his arm around a surprised Theo No-Name before escorting him away from the mob. "Come on, Theo. Can I call you Theo? It's apparently the only option. Anyway, I insist you sit in our compartment. Say, have you ever tried rugelach?"

Susan Bones, Sue Li, and several other students followed behind Anthony and Theo. Kevin stopped and looked back to Justin, crooking an eyebrow as he did. For several seconds, Justin's face showed his conflict before he finally sighed deeply and separated from the group he'd reluctantly joined to follow the one that was now leaving.

"Justin?" Ernie MacMillan called out.

"Sorry, Ernie," he said apologetically. "I'm just ... sorry." Then, he shrugged his shoulders before running to catch up to Kevin. "*Stupid Hufflepuff loyalty*," he muttered to himself as he went.

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Once aboard the train, Harry and Neville made their way to the back where their group usually congregated. Neville was still tense, but Harry was more relaxed. He'd spoken with Theo over the summer, and they'd both agreed it was unwise for Theo to force a confrontation with Neville until Harry had better gauged how deeply the Sanction was affecting him. Harry had also surreptitiously observed the scene involving Theo that had played out on the platform. He was surprised but pleased to see Theo walk off under the apparent protection of a group of students sympathetic to his plight. Given the number of people who seemed to have come to the outcast boy's defense, Harry was already revising his plans for how to best help Theo in the coming year.

Inside the compartment, the two boys found the majority of their regular cohort. Hermione was giving Amy Wilkes some pointers on Second Year Transfiguration, Blaise was sitting off by himself working on a crossword puzzle, and Luna was intently reading a paperback book. Harry craned his neck to read the cover. It was *Exploring the World of Lucid Dreaming* by some Muggle psychologist he'd never heard of.

"Lucid dreaming?" Harry inquired.

"Um-hmm," Luna replied dreamily without looking up. "Hermione got it for me. I told her I'd been having odd dreams that kept me from sleeping well but that I couldn't recall when I woke up. She said this might help."

"Okay, but what *is* lucid dreaming?" Neville asked.

"First things first," Hermione said as she jumped up and gave the boy a hug. "It's so good to see you again! I've missed you both this summer. And Neville, you never responded to my owls!"

Neville shrugged sheepishly. "Gram wanted me kept incomm... um."

"Incommunicado," Harry said idly as he stowed his carry-on bag.

"Yeah, that. She was paranoid about Death Eaters."

"Sensible, I suppose," the bushy-haired girl said as she sat down. "And to answer your question, lucid dreaming means that you know when you're dreaming and can therefore shape the environment of your dreams. It helps with nightmares and also lets you remember dreams more

clearly when you wake up. Now, tell me all about your summer. I know *nothing* about wizarding Africa."

Neville nodded in some confusion at both her explanation and her change of topic. Then, he looked around the compartment. "Sure, but first, who's missing?"

"Ginny's running late," Amy said. "Apparently, it's a family tradition."

"Ah, there they come now," Harry said pointing out the window at the platform, which was nearly empty except for an excited gaggle of red-headed children (plus Jim Potter who was struggling with a large container of some kind) running for the train which was minutes from departing. Everyone in the compartment chuckled at the perpetually tardy Weasleys.

Except for Blaise.

"Ginny's the last then. I already wrote Theo last summer and said I didn't want him sitting with us." The group's laughter died instantly.

"Why would you do that?" Hermione asked quietly. Blaise didn't even look up from his crossword puzzle.

"Because he's under the Sanction, and anyone who hangs out with him will get treated like garbage. So I dumped him."

No one spoke. Neville stared intently at Blaise, who finally looked up and noticed his expression.

"What, Longbottom? I'm a Slytherin. And an especially slimy one, according to some people in your House. I'm not going to maintain a relationship that would be social poison."

That would just be silly." The Gryffindor didn't respond, but Blaise smiled at him anyway. "And honestly I don't see why you're getting mad at *me*. At least I've got an actual *reason* to shun the boy."

Neville's face flushed, while Hermione looked back and forth between the two anxiously, not knowing how to respond to this unanticipated exchange. And then, things got weird.

"*Ooo! Shiny!*" Luna exclaimed as she practically jumped out of her seat with excitement.

"Um ... what?" Harry asked as the others simply stared at the girl.

"Neville's fury-flies! They're all shiny, almost metallic. And purple!" she paused and narrowed her eyes as if to study something in the air around Neville that only she could perceive (which, as Hermione and Harry knew, was actually the case). Despite himself, Neville looked around nervously, as if searching for imaginary insects crawling on him. Luna tilted her head.

"Or maybe they're indigo," she muttered. "I should probably invest in a color chart or something like that."

"I'm nearly certain I'll regret this," Blaise drawled. "But what do metallic indigo fury-flies signify?"

"Oh, I have no idea," Luna replied without taking her eyes from an unnerved Neville Longbottom. "I've never seen any before today, but the train platform was simply *crawling* with them." She tapped her lips with her forefinger as she thought. Then, the girl took a deep breath.

"*THEO NO-NAME!*" she practically shouted at Neville, who jumped slightly in response. Luna's eyes widened in marvel as she studied the air around him. "Fascinating," she said in a soft voice before reaching for her bag to pull out a journal with the word "*Mysterio!*" written on it in bright rainbow colors.

Everyone simply perplexed at her actions except Hermione, who frowned instead.

"Luna," she said disapprovingly. "What have I told you about experimenting on your friends?"

"That only through the scientific method can we truly comprehend the world around us," Luna replied as she began writing notes on her observations.

"No," Hermione said. "Well ... yes. But I meant the *other* bit."

Luna looked over at her in surprise and then blushed herself. "That it's unethical to use my friends to research nargles and wrackspurts and everything else without informed consent?"

"That's the one."

Luna looked at Neville contritely. "I'm sorry. I apologize for taking advantage of your condition for experimental purposes."

"That's ... okay," he said slowly, still confused about what just happened.

Then, all of them jumped when the doors to the compartment slid open and a breathless Ginny practically burst in and fell into a seat between Amy and Luna.

"Honestly! I'm a twelve-year-old girl! How is it possible that I was ready to leave *an hour* before all the boys in my family?! Not to mention, we had to go back to the house at the last minute because the Boy-Who-Lived-To-Be-Late forgot something he just couldn't do without!"

Ginny looked around and finally noticed everyone's expressions. "What did I miss?" she asked.

"I couldn't even begin to explain it," Harry said. "Out of curiosity, what did Jim forget that was so important?"

Ginny favored him with a long-suffering expression. "Would you believe *his snake!*"

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### ***Meanwhile two cars down...***

Jim Potter was somewhat nervously holding court in an overcrowded compartment containing himself, Ron, Seamus, Dean, and most of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. With a bit of a flourish, he removed the cover to the box he'd been carrying to reveal a glass terrarium containing a two-foot-long snake with brown and yellow scales.

"This ... is Steve," he said as he looked up at his Gryffindor friends trying to gauge their reactions.

"Is he poisonous?" Katie Bell asked nervously.

"No. He's a California kingsnake. Completely non-poisonous and completely docile unless someone really tries to provoke him. Kingsnakes are one of the most common snakes owned as household pets in America."

"Cool," Dean said with a smile. Jim relaxed as the rest of his friends crowded around somewhat excitedly, any fears



about him being the Heir of Slytherin forgotten for the time being.

"How long have you had him?" Seamus asked.

"About a week," Jim said. "He was a late birthday present from my parents."

Actually, Jim thought that Steve was a late birthday present from his mother which she had presented to him a week before. Meanwhile, his father stood beside her holding perhaps least convincing smile Jim had ever seen on a human being before heading off to his private office from which he did not emerge until late that night. Still, Jim finally got his pet snake, and he wasn't going to look a gift reptile in the mouth.

"I bet it will be fun," Alicia Spinnet said, "finally having someone else you can speak Parseltongue with."

Jim glanced at Ron sitting beside him as the boy swallowed and tugged at the collar of his jumper. "Yeah," Jim said with a mischievous smile. "That *will* be nice."

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### ***Sometime later ...***

The excitement over Jim's new pet snake died down eventually, and talk soon turned to Quidditch, as Oliver insisted on outlining his plans for the season. If anyone present knew about Oliver's membership in Theo No-Name's "welcoming committee," no one raised the topic. After an hour or so, the door opened, and Percy popped his head in.

"Sorry to intrude," he said. "George, it's time for the Prefect Meeting." George nodded gravely while Fred rolled his eyes

and Lee Jordan snicked softly. George frowned at them both before rising to follow Percy down the hallway.

"So how has Fred been treating you?" Percy asked.

"Eh. He's a little standoffish, but he's coming round," George replied.

"Is he?" Percy said while trying to hide a smile "You might want to check your badge then."

Frowning, George looked down at his chest and then twisted the badge around so he could read the words now emblazoned on it. "Big ... Head ... Prefect?"

Percy clucked his tongue softly. "Not as imaginative as I'm accustomed to. Can I assume that you were the one responsible for coming up with the quips and verbal humor?"

George blushed slightly. "When we put the spellwork together, it was supposed to say *Big Head Boy*. You know, back when we assumed that you were going to *be* Head Boy." He grimaced at the intended butt of his and Fred's jokes. "Sorry, Percy."

Percy seemed not to even notice the apology. "*Big Head Boy*. Yes, that *is* rather clever, I suppose." He turned and smiled at the younger twin. "Sorry you didn't get to use it."

George shook his head and tried to use a Finite on the altered badge to no avail. Percy pulled his own wand.

"I know from well-honed experience that it generally requires multiple Finites to undo a prank pulled off by you and Fred. On three." The boy counted off before he and George fired off simultaneous Finites, and with a flash, the

message on the badge changed back to read "5th Year Gryffindor Prefect."

"Thanks, Percy," George said distractedly.

"It's okay, George. He'll come around." George nodded and a few seconds later, they were at the very first compartment on the train. Percy opened the door to the Prefect's Compartment and strode in confidently. George followed only to stop as all the other Prefects stared at him and the badge he wore in shock. Sure, the letter they'd all received had *said* George Weasley would be the 5th Year Gryffindor Prefect, but they'd all assumed it was just another Weasley prank they'd somehow pulled on the school's Prefect Announcements letter. None of them actually thought it had been *true*.

"Hi there, um, fellow prefects," said George as he surveyed the compartment before giving a nervous wave.

There was a long horrified silence that only ended when 7th Year Slytherin prefect Titus Mitchell let out an extremely vulgar string of expletives.

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### ***Meanwhile ...***

After a few hours with his friends catching up on their various summer adventures, Harry decided it was time to stretch his legs.

"If you guys don't mind," he said, "I'm stepping out for a bit. I need to touch base with Adrian Pucey about some Quidditch matters."

"You planning on seeing anyone else while you're out and about?" Neville said in an oddly cool voice.

Harry shrugged. "You never know who you'll bump into. It is a fairly small train, after all." Then, he stepped out into the corridor and closed the door behind him, with Neville watching intently the whole time. Meanwhile, Luna was watching *Neville* just as intently while making sketches in her journal.

"*Fascinating*," she muttered again under her breath.

From there, Harry casually made his way from the rear of the train towards the front, stopping from time to time to drop in on friends, allies, and acquaintances too important to ignore. Daphne needed reassurance that their family alliances were still strong and that Harry wasn't going to do something *silly* over the Theo No-Name situation. Milly Bulstrode needed reassurance that she'd get a fair shot at Beater for the Slytherin Quidditch team now that it was official that Derrick and Bole's parents had revoked their Quidditch privileges. He passed by another compartment where the two of them were sitting morosely, and they both gave him foul looks as he did.

Eventually, he finally found Adrian Pucey, the new Quidditch captain, who was already itching to talk plays. The team had lost Flint who was technically returning as as "Eighth Year" but would be ineligible for Quidditch. However Graham Montague was quite talented (though not in Harry's league) and eager to get back on the team now that his grades had improved enough to please his parents. If they could get the Beater and Seeker situations resolved, the Slytherins might still be able to field a strong team. Meanwhile, in response to Harry's discrete hints, Pucey bluntly admitted that he had no particular aversion to Theo No-Name as his family was not affected by the Sanction, but neither did he have any particular fondness for the boy he barely knew nor any desire to endanger his standing in

Slytherin House over the matter. He also advised Harry that both Graham Montague and Cassius Warrington, the only two plausible candidates for Chaser, were from Noble families and would likely be hostile to Theo. Harry thanked Pucey for his honesty and then left to continue his journey towards the front of the train.

As Harry entered the next car, he saw his twin coming from the other direction.

"Hey, stranger!" Jim said with a smile.

"Please, we talked by Floo two days ago," Harry replied easily. "It's not my fault you spent most of your summer learning kung fu in Nepal or whatever."

Jim laughed. At that moment, a compartment door opened up, and Theo poked his head out. "Harry?" he stage whispered.

Harry looked around and saw that no one was watching, and then he and Jim entered the compartment that Theo was sharing with Anthony, Kevin, both Sues (Li and Bones), and a few other Muggle-born and Muggle-raised students. Harry was somewhat surprised to see Justin Finch-Fletchley among them and looking rather tense. Harry popped out his wand and used the Color-Changing Charm to tint the windows black before sitting down.

"Well, I see you've made some new friends, Theo," he noted.

"And I see you are unwilling to be seen in the same room with Theo, Potter," Susan Li said with asperity.

"Easy, Sue," Theo interrupted. "It's okay. Me and Harry talked over the summer. We're good."

"Or as good as things are going to get once we're both in the Slytherin dorms," Harry said while making a face. "I've been doing a headcount on who all is affected by the Sanction. It's probably just under half of the student body, but when you add in the number of kids who will stay neutral to avoid conflict, it will be a lot more. And a clear majority of the Slytherins will either be affected or unwilling to side with you even if they're not affected."

"Good thing, you've got a private room, at least," Anthony said to Theo.

Harry smiled smugly. "Yeah, that was clever of me, wasn't it."

"You set that up?!" Jim exclaimed with a grin.

Harry nodded. "I actually got the idea from something you'd said about how Ron, Seamus, and Dean put up a dividing wall in your dorm room last year after everything thought you were the Heir of Slytherin. With the layout of the Slytherin dorms, I realized it would be simple to set up private rooms, so I wrote to the Headmaster about it. Apparently, the Hogwarts house elves can make fairly significant modifications to the interior structure of the school when asked to do so by someone with sufficient authority. Or possibly just someone who asks them nicely. He was vague about that."

He turned to Justin, who still seemed lost in thought. "And I must say I'm glad to see you here, Justin. From what I saw, it looked like you were on the other side during that confrontation out on the platform."

Justin blushed but then shrugged instead of saying anything.

"It's okay," said Susan Bones. "He made the right choice in the end."

"Well, I *had* to." The Muggleborn swallowed painfully, as his throat was suddenly very dry. "My grandfather fought in the War."

"The War?" Jim asked. "What was a Muggle doing fighting in a wizarding war?"

"He means World War II," Anthony said quietly. "A Muggle conflict."

Justin nodded and looked over to the other boy. "He was an officer in the 11th Armored Division – the Black Bulls. He was there when they liberated Bergen-Belsen. He never talked about it when I was growing up. My Mum said Grandad never talked about it with *her* when she was growing up either. But after my First Year, once I'd learned what the word *Mudblood* actually meant, I asked him about what he saw. It was horrible. Almost fifty years later, and he still was remembered how those poor people ..." He shook his head to clear it. "Anyway, after what you said out on the platform. I just couldn't stay on that side. It would have been like betraying him, like ... letting him down."

Kevin reached over and squeezed his shoulder. "It's okay, Justin. You made the right decision in the end."

"Yes," Justin said dejectedly. "I just don't know how long I can *keep* making the right decision."

"What do you mean?" asked Anthony.

"The Wizengamot," Harry said softly. Justin looked up at him sharply. Then, he gave a mirthless laugh.

"Of course. It figures if anyone would know ahead of time, it would be you."

"I don't know any details," said Harry. "Just things I've put together in my head."

"What are you two talking about?" asked Susan Bones.

"Well," Justin said to the group, "it turns out that I'm not just a Muggleborn. I'm also the first wizard in a long line of squibs that descend from a now dormant Noble family. One with no living Pureblood or Halfblood descendants but which hasn't been struck from the lists yet. And one open-minded enough to allow Muggleborns who can prove their squib lineage to inherit everything in the absence of a *proper* heir. At some point this year, I'll be sworn in as Lord Conditional and will have to swear oaths of loyalty to the Wizengamot before I can receive my inheritance."

"And when you do, the Sanction will affect you just as strongly as it does MacMillan, Parkinson, and all the rest," said Theo. "It's okay, Justin. I don't blame you for it. Honestly, I don't even blame *them* for it. My father ... my *former* father is 100% at fault."

"Thank you, Theo," Justin said sadly. "I just hope you feel the same a year from now."

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### ***Later still ...***

The Prefects Meeting was only just wrapping up when everyone noticed with great surprise that the Hogwarts Express seemed to be unexpectedly slowing down. Bobby Lattimer pulled out a gold pocket watch that had once belonged to his father's father, a Muggle train conductor who had been awarded it on the day of his retirement.



Bobby's parents had refurbished it (and added an enchantment to make sure it was always accurate) before gifting it to him when he became Head Boy.

"We can't be pulling into the station," he said. "It's far too soon."

"What have you done now, Weasley?" Titus Mitchell said accusingly.

"Honestly, Mitchell," George replied with some annoyance. "I'm flattered that you think Fred and me are diabolical geniuses on par with Dumbledore himself. But we didn't do anything to the Prefect's letters, I didn't mug somebody else and steal their Prefect's badge, and we certainly aren't clever enough or stupid enough to muck about with the Hogwart's Express."

"Enough, both of you," snapped Penelope Clearwater, the new Head Girl. Percy opened his mouth to speak but then shut it as soon as she glanced in his direction. They'd talked over the summer about the fact that she was Head Girl and he was *not*, as they'd been expecting, Head Boy. She'd asked him if it was going to be "weird," and he gallantly assured him that it would not. But now that they were here together wearing their respective badges, Percy was finally confronted with the fact that his girlfriend technically outranked him in the Hogwarts organizational tree, a fact which did indeed feel *weird*.

Meanwhile, Bobby opened the door and stepped out into the corridor before casting the Sonorous Charm.

"ATTENTION ALL STUDENTS. THIS IS THE HEAD BOY. AS YOU'VE NOTICED, THE TRAIN HAS STOPPED PREMATURELY. DO NOT BE ALARMED. ALL STUDENTS

SHOULD REMAIN IN THEIR COMPARTMENTS UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE."

Back in the last car, Neville looked out the window and noticed it was growing quite cloudy and dark outside. Everyone was muttering questions, but none of them knew what was happening. Luna looked around the room with a quizzical expression before shrugging, pulling out her wand to cast a quick Lumos, and then returning to her book.

Amy shuddered. "It is just me, or it getting colder in here."

"It's not just you," Hermione said. "I think I'll head forward to find a prefect and see what's going on."

"Hermione," said Neville with some frustration. "The Head Boy *just said* we were to remain in our compartments."

"No," she responded as she grabbed her bag and opened the door. "He said we *should* remain in our compartments. Obviously, that was meant as more of a suggestion than a command. And anyway, I'm a Gryffindor, and Gryffindors *rush in*!"

"That's. Not. A. Compliment!" Blaise spat through gritted teeth.

"No matter," Hermione said cheerfully. "We're still all on the Hogwarts Express. I'm sure it's perfectly safe whatever's going on." And with that, she was out the door. Blaise gave an exasperated sigh before following her.

"Coming, Longbottom?" he said.

"But ... they *just said* to stay in our compartments!" Neville said again in frustration.

Blaise shrugged. "So they did, for all the good that does us. Oh well, you can stay here if you wish. If there are any problems, I'll look after our Hermione myself. I'm sure your presence would be completely superfluous."

With that, the Slytherin sauntered out of the compartment. After he left, Neville squeezed his eyes shut and then banged the back of his head against the cushioned headrest in frustration. "Dammit," he muttered as he rose to follow the other two. Amy and Ginny looked at each other for a second before standing up as one. But before they could take a step, Neville whirled around on them with an angry expression and a single finger pointed in their direction.

"No!" he barked, and the intensity of his gaze paralyzed the two girls. Then, he jabbed his finger in the direction of their seat, and the two girls dropped back down onto the bench in unison. Satisfied, Neville turned and strode off in the direction of Hermione and Blaise. For her part, Luna didn't even seem to notice that anyone had left.

Nor did Luna or either of her two year-mates notice the patterns of frost that were quickly growing across the surface of the windows.

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Near the front of the train, Harry and Jim had also ignored the Head Boy's instructions and stepped out into the open corridor. By now, there was a thick spiderweb of frost on the train windows, and the cloud cover outside was so dark that it seemed like twilight rather than midday. Instantly, both boys noticed that they could see their breath from the cold.

"What's causing this?" Jim said nervously as he tried to look through the frosty window. Suddenly, Harry grabbed him by

the arm.

"At a guess," he said in a sudden fright, "I'd say it's probably that."

Jim turned in the direction his brother was pointing and then gasped in terror. At the entryway to the train car was a tall figure in a tattered black robes. A hood totally covered its face and its sleeves were long enough so that its hands could not be seen. Nevertheless, both boys knew at once what it was – a Dementor.

"You shouldn't be here," Harry called out with far more confidence than he felt. "The train was searched before anyone boarded it. There aren't any Death Eaters here."

The Dementor said nothing but instead floated towards the two boys in silence. As it moved closer, the area around it seemed to turn black, as if the shadows it cast had come alive and were slithering along the walls in its wake. The air grew ever colder, and the windows closest to the creature were soon caked in frost. From somewhere in the distance, Harry heard the soft chittering of a doxie and perhaps a very faint scream. Immediately, Harry focused on his Occlumency training and bolstered his psychic defenses as much as he could to block out the effects of the Dementor's aura.

"Who's that?" Jim said suddenly and anxiously.

"It's a Dementor, Jim, obviously!" Harry glanced at his brother in surprise at his question, but he was startled by Jim's appearance. The Boy-Who-Lived had gone completely pale at the sight of the Dementor and already looked unsteady on his feet.

"No, the *scream ... who's that screaming?!*" Jim said shakily before collapsing on the floor. The Dementor inclined his head slightly and then floated more quickly in their direction. Harry popped his wand and stepped forward between his brother and the Dementor with as much courage as he could muster.

"***EXPECTO PATRONUM!***" he cried out. In response, a stream of silvery mist poured from his wand. He was disappointed – Harry had thought that actual proximity to a Dementor might cause him to produce a corporeal Patronus. The mist struck the Dementor who hissed and pulled back a few feet. Then, it seemed to study both Harry and the unconscious Jim as if trying to decide between two targets. Suddenly, it lunged forward again despite Harry's Patronus which soon wavered under the strain.

Harry cast again. "***EXPECTO ... PATRONUM!***" His incantation was weaker now. Despite his best efforts to block the hideous creature's psychic attack, Harry could feel its seeping through his mental defenses. He had a powerful and disturbing impression of being covered in icy-cold worms that were digging, burrowing into his mind. The mist sprang forth from his wand, but it was even weaker than before, and it barely seemed to slow the Dementor at all. The creature raised up an arm, and its fetid sleeve fell away to reveal an emaciated bony hand that stank of death and decay. It pointed a finger at him as if in accusation. All Harry could see now was the Dementor. Everything else was covered in complete darkness. He heard the woman's scream again, though faintly, but he could feel tiny sharp-fingered things crawling up his back as they chattered hungrily.

"***EX ... EXPECTO ... PAT...!***" Harry's third attempt to summon a Patronus failed completely, and he dropped to

one knee in front of his unconscious brother. Now, both of the Dementors hands were exposed as they reached for his face. They stank of rot, and in his increasing delirium and terror, Harry thought he saw maggots crawling over them. He heard the faint scream again, this time accompanied by a booming jubilant voice from somewhere far away that cried out "*Suppertime!*"

And then, the worst thing of all: The Dementor *spoke!*

"[*I/We*] *kNoooW [your] FaAaAaAaCE [DIE! DIE! DIE!]*

As the Dementor was just about to touch him, Harry's vision went blurry. Desperately, he tried to remember the words of the Patronus Charm, but somehow, the knowledge had vanished from his memory and his wand felt like heavy lead in his hands. He exhaled heavily, and fog - and perhaps something more than fog - came out of his mouth and was instantly sucked up into whatever was hidden by the Dementor's hood. Harry focused all his remaining will and raised his wand in a quivering hand, desperate to try then Patronus one last time before the creature Kissed him and his brother both.

"***EXPECTO PATRONUM!***"

Suddenly, Harry was awash in a brilliant blinding light. The feeling of terror and despair that the Dementor had provoked vanished as quickly as it had appeared. The boy still felt icy-cold, but it was different now. Instead of the soul-draining grave chill of the Dementor, this was an invigorating cold that somehow roused he boy from his near-stupor. There was also a faint aftertaste of salt water in his mouth, and he strangely felt as if he were being raised up into the air. But above all, Harry was suddenly

overcome with a sense of hope and an absolute certainty that he was going to be okay.

The magical light faded then, but so did the darkness as the interior lights of the train suddenly came back on. The Dementor was gone, and a low moan behind him indicated that Jim had regained consciousness. Harry looked around, and through the rapidly melting ice on the windows, he saw something as heartening as it was unexpected. The Dementor was now flying away from the train as fast as it could ... with Elby, Neville Longbottom's grizzly bear Patronus, in hot pursuit. Harry turned around and was pleased to see a shaken but confident Neville with his wand still drawn and flanked by Hermione and Blaise, the latter of whom was peering out the window with an amused expression.

"Heh. *Exit, pursued by a bear*," he said with a cheeky grin. Immediately, Hermione punched him in the arm before stepping forward to attend to the Potter boys.

"Are you two alright? Neither of you got Kissed or anything at least. Do you need some chocolate?"

"Yes, no, and sure, why not," Harry replied as he pulled himself off the floor before helping a still woozy Jim up as well.

"Well, that was ... perfectly awful," Jim said. "Is everyone okay?"

"I was going to ask you that," Harry said. "You were the one who passed out."

Jim blushed and frowned at that, and Harry regretted his words. "It's okay. I was about to join you on the floor when Neville showed up and saved us."

Neville, at that point, was looking out the window as if searching for the Dementor. He knew that his Patronus had already dissipated, and he was concerned the foul creature might return. At the sound of his name, he turned back to his friends with a bashful smile. "We're all just lucky that Lockhart was crazy enough to make my try to learn that spell! Otherwise ..."

The boy froze suddenly, the smile draining from his face to be replaced with a glare. Harry looked at his strange expression and then followed the direction of his attention. It was focused on Theo, who had just stepped out of the compartment (looking every bit as pale as Jim and Harry) to instantly catch Neville's attention... and his ire.

"Right then," Neville said in a low voice. "Obviously, everyone's okay. So I'm going back to my seat. I suggest you all do the same before a prefect catches you standing out in the corridor where you might get eaten by a Dementor or something." And with that, he turned on his heels and stalked back the way he came without another word.

By this point, other students were stepping out of their own compartments. While several younger children seemed cold and shaken, no one seemed as deeply affected as Jim and, to a lesser extent, Harry. Hermione insisted that they both eat several chocolate bars each (and then recommended that they brush their teeth extra hard after dinner) before Blaise practically dragged her back to their own car. For his part, Harry thought it best to return with them and do some damage control on Neville. But before he could, Jim grabbed him by the arm and leaned in close.

"Did ... did you hear a woman screaming?" he whispered anxiously.



Harry hesitated before finally nodding yes. "Faintly though. My shields blocked out a lot of it and, well, whatever that memory is of, I have more recent ones that are a lot worse for a Dementor to play around with." He squeezed his brother's shoulder. "But whatever it was, it's over now. It's just some sort of Dementor nastiness. Try not to let it worry you."

Jim nodded back and then returned to his own compartment where Ron and the Quidditch team were waiting. He asked if anyone would mind if he took Steve out of his terrarium. No one objected, and he spent the rest of the trip in virtual silence as he gently rubbed the kingsnake's head while staring pensively out the window as the Scottish highlands rolled by.

## Chapter End Notes

AN1: Some readers pointed out after the last chapter that Draco is canonically born in June. Canon, in this instance, refers to a single Pottermore article, and I've already said that this story is not Pottermore-compliant. I needed Draco to be born in early 1980 so that Theo could be born in time to be in Harry's class, and so he was.

Similarly, I am ignoring everything JKR wrote on Pottermore about Umbridge because it's all completely unworkable. Rowling stops just short of declaring Umbridge to have been "born evil," and Tom Riddle is a much more sympathetic character. I honestly want to know what that mysterious "instructor" upon whom canon-Umbridge is based did to Rowling to engender such absolute loathing. If you haven't noticed already, be aware that POS-Umbridge is a rather different character than the canon version.

AN2: "Exit, pursued by a bear" is from Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*. It is generally considered to be the most famous stage instruction in the history of theater.

# Feasts, Electives (pt 1)

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### ***1 September 1993*** ***Hogwarts***

Thankfully, the rest of the journey to Hogwarts was without incident, and Harry and his friends soon made their way to the castle. Once inside, as the other students were being ushered into the Great Hall, Harry told Blaise that he needed to go to the loo and to save him a seat. The other boy looked at him quizzically as if there were some imperceptible subtext he wasn't getting. Finally, he shrugged and nodded before heading inside while Harry walked to the nearest boy's restroom where he quickly checked to make sure no one else was present. Then, he hesitated as if somewhat embarrassed by what he was about to do before speaking out with a firm voice.

"Ahem! May I please speak with the house elf known as Tweak?" he said loudly. Nothing happened for several seconds, and accustomed as he was to Dobby's immediate arrival upon summoning, Harry assumed that the Slytherin house elf would not answer his call. But then to his surprise, there was a soft pop heralding the arrival of Tweak, a surprisingly serious-looking elf dressed in an apron covered in flour and who looked decidedly vexed at being summoned away from the feast preparations to answer a student's call.

"Begging the young master's pardon," Tweak said in a tone of voice that was firm, bordering on cold, "but house elveses

are not to be answering calls from students. And particularly not during preparations for the Great Feast. Tweak has twenty shepherd's pies that have to come out of the oven very soon."

"Um, sorry, Tweak," Harry said with some embarrassment. "But Hoskins at Longbottom Manor said I could perhaps talk to you. As did some former Slytherin students you may recall. You see, I need a favor."

Tweak crooked an eyebrow in a manner that conveyed far more dubiousness than Harry had ever seen on a house elf's face before.

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### ***Meanwhile at the Ministry of Magic ...***

There was a hard knock on the door to the Senior Undersecretary's office, which caused Dolores's head to jerk up suddenly. Swiftly, she pulled her wand and a small compact mirror out of her handbag, and with a quick spell, she fixed her runny mascara and restored her makeup to normalcy.

"Enter," she said somewhat shakily.

The door opened, and she fought back a grimace. It was James Potter, perhaps the last person she wanted to see this evening.

"Forgive the intrusion, Madam Umbridge," he said brusquely. "Minister Fudge has left to consult with the Muggle PM, and both his assistant and yours have gone for the day. I figured I might as well give a report on that debacle with the Hogwarts Express to someone and you're the only one still here."

"Of course, Chief Potter," she said with a sniff. "Do come in."

Potter entered the office and took a chair but then paused as he studied the woman before him. He wasn't sure but he suspected Umbridge had been crying.

"Madam Umbridge? Is ... is everything alright?" he asked hesitantly.

She chuckled and smiled at him wanly. "I think you know the answer to that, Chief Potter. You're the one here to deliver to me a report on my mistakes."

"*Your* mistakes?" he asked in confusion.

"Yes. I was, after all, the one who came up with the brilliant idea to manipulate the dementors by stationing them near Hogwarts, which apparently has had the effect of placing the entire student body in danger before they could even get through the front doors." James started to respond, but she continued before he could. "I want you to know, Lord Potter, that I have already tendered my resignation to Minister Fudge, but he has refused to accept it. His belief is that since no one on the train was actually harmed by the rogue dementor, it would be best to minimize the incident rather than undermine confidence in the government. Nevertheless ..."

"Dolores," James interrupted firmly. "Stop. This wasn't your fault. I wasn't happy with the dementor situation – no one is – but you and Cornelius made the best decision you could." He rubbed the back of his neck self-consciously. He had not been prepared for the woman's reaction.

"And honestly, I don't think you're nearly to blame for what nearly happened as I am," he added almost dejectedly.

"You, Lord Potter?" Dolores said with surprise.

"Me. After all, I am Chief Auror. I was the one who decided that we needed a security presence at Platform 9 3/4. But like a complacent idiot, it never occurred to me to have an auror or two actually ride the Express to Hogsmeade just in case something happened. And please, call me James."

She nodded. "Very well ... James." She reached over and took his report. "I'll review this before I leave tonight and owl a copy to the Minister. But do we at least know what happened to cause the dementor to go rogue?"

James nodded. "Portkey malfunction, apparently. The two aurors assigned to the dementor activated their portkeys according to standard procedure to deliver it to the Forbidden Forest to join its fellow abominations. But something went wrong. Both of them were transported but the dementor got left behind on Platform 9 3/4! To be honest, we were kind of lucky that it decided to follow the train. It could have easily passed through the barrier to the Muggle part of King's Cross and Merlin knows how many it could have Kissed before anyone even knew what was happening."

Umbridge frowned. "But instead it flew halfway to Scotland and boarded the train ... apparently just to menace your sons?"

"So it seems. And yes, I find that detail as disturbing as you do."

Dolores shuddered.

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***Back at Hogwarts...***

The Sorting had gone without incident. "*Well, almost without incident,*" Harry thought to himself as he contemplated two new additions to Slytherin House. He had not been surprised to see both the Carrow sisters Sorted into Slytherin. He was intrigued but not overly concerned when he glanced over towards Cassius Warrington, the only other current student affiliated with House Selwyn and noticed that the boy seemed pale and nervous as he watched his cousins' Sortings. The surprise came when he happened to glance over at the Gryffindor table on the far side of the room and noticed Luna Lovegood looking back and forth between the Carrows with her hand over her mouth and her expression depicting what looked like revulsion. He made a mental note to inquire about that as soon as possible.

After the Carrows were seated, the rest of the Sorting went as expected, and so Harry spent the rest of his time catching up with friends. Blaise sat on one side of him, and Eighth Year Marcus Flint sat on the other in the position usually reserved for Theo. As for Mr. No-Name himself, the outcast was presently sitting alone at the end of the long table closest to the teachers with several empty seats separating him from the rest of his house. Harry had claimed a seat in the exact middle of the Slytherin table, with his friends, allies, and the majority of the Quidditch team clustered around him. Conveniently, all the Slytherins who Harry privately referred to as "Junior Death Eaters" sat together at the end farthest from the teachers.

After the Sorting's conclusion, Dumbledore rose and led a round of applause for the new First Years. "And now, I have a few announcements, one of which is quite serious, so I will break with tradition and present it first before you all become befuddled by our excellent feast ..."

He cleared his throat and continued. "As you are all no doubt now well aware after the incident which took place on the Hogwart's Express, our school is presently playing host to some of the dementors of Azkaban, who are here on Ministry business." For a change, his eyes weren't twinkling at all. From what Harry had divined, the Headmaster was not at all happy about the dementors' presence but apparently was given no choice in the matter.

"They are stationed at every entrance to the grounds, with most of their number floating above the Forbidden Forest. And while they are with us, I must make it plain that no one is to leave school without permission. Dementors cannot be fooled by tricks or disguises – or even Invisibility Cloaks." He added the last bit nonchalantly, but everyone at the Gryffindor table immediately turned to look at Jim Potter who did his best to look innocent.

"It is not in the nature of a dementor to understand pleading or excuses. I therefore warn each and every one of you to give them no reason to harm you. Furthermore, in light of developments from this past term, the school has revised its curriculum as pertains to the Patronus Charm, the only Charm capable of repelling dementors. The Patronus Charm will henceforth be part of the curriculum for all NEWT level DADA students, and special evening classes will be offered for younger students who wish to attempt to master this admittedly difficult Charm. These classes will be under the auspices of the DADA instructor and his teaching assistant, Mr. Marcus Flint, who has deigned to return to Hogwarts this year to aid us with this special project." At that, Harry led a round of applause for the embarrassed Marcus that was joined by the entire Slytherin table followed by the rest of the student body.



"And since I have mentioned the DADA instructor, allow me to move on to some more pleasant announcements. This year, we have three new members of the Hogwarts staff to introduce. First, consenting to fill the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher is the former Chief of the British Auror Corps, Professor Rufus Scrimgeour." The other man rose and nodded in response to the warm applause he received.

"As to our second new appointment," Dumbledore continued. "Well, I am sorry to tell you that Professor Kettleburn, our Care of Magical Creatures teacher, retired at the end of last year in order to enjoy more time with his remaining limbs. However, I am delighted to say that his place will be filled by none other than Rubeus Hagrid, who has agreed to take on this teaching job in addition to his gamekeeping duties."

Everyone clapped at that as well, though there were some looks of confusion among students who hadn't bothered to inquire as to who had assigned them the Monster Book of Monsters without instructions on how to open it without getting bitten. Harry, being far more astute than the typical student, had asked Snape during one of the man's visits to Longbottom Manor. Kettleburn apparently had chosen retirement because he had felt embarrassed by his failure to identify "Slytherin's Monster" as a basilisk from the few clues available and even more embarrassed when he had actually been the first to fall victim to the creature when it attacked the teacher's lounge during the prior term. His announcement had caught Dumbledore by surprise, and the Headmaster had pulled a lot of strings to get Hagrid a temporary teaching certificate rather than be forced to accept whoever the Ministry decided to impose on the school. Privately, Snape was unhappy about the appointment but also believed that it was just temporary

and that Dumbledore was stalling until Wilhemina Grubbly-Plank, the current CoMC instructor at Beauxbatons and a Hogwarts graduate, finished her current teaching contract and could take over for Hagrid. Snape also advised Harry that while Hagrid was highly knowledgeable about magical creatures, he himself was big, strong, practically bulletproof, and immune to poisons, which meant he would likely have no appreciation for how fragile his students would be in the face of Class XXX or higher creatures.

"And finally," Dumbledore continued, "as most of you may know, our former caretaker, Mr. Filch has ... moved on for other job opportunities." At that, the Headmaster was interrupted by the loudest applause thus far. "Yes, yes. I share your fondness for Mr. Filch and your delight that he has found happiness elsewhere. But now, I would like to introduce you all to his replacement, Mr. Malachi Sturgeon!"

At the far end of the staff table, a man who Harry had not noticed before rose. He was dressed in shabby clothes and holding a cat that looked even uglier and more bad-tempered than Mrs. Norris had. He had shaggy light-brown hair and a short beard, and he practically sneered as he surveyed the student body, perhaps in response to the applause which was far more tepid than Hagrid had received. Or perhaps that was just the man's nature. Harry had no idea if Malachi Sturgeon was related to Filch, but in terms of personality, they seemed eerily similar.

"Now finally, before we all dig in, let me say a few final words: Nitwit, Blubber, Oddment, Tweak!" With a flash, the usual cornucopia of foodstuffs appeared on the tables, and the students dove in. Harry thought for a second and then barked out an amused laugh.

"What's so funny?" Daphne asked. "Dumbledore has made that exact same quip for the last three years."

"More like the last eight, at least," Marcus added as he helped himself to some boiled potatoes.

"Yeah," said Harry as he glanced towards the Headmaster. "But this is the first year I actually got the joke."

He didn't explain any further, but privately, Harry wondered if he was the only current student who knew that Nitwit, Blubber, Oddment, and Tweak were actually the names of the four Hogwarts house elves assigned to supervise the specific needs of the four Hogwarts houses, and that Dumbledore's little joke was actually their cue to convey the food the elves had prepared to the Great Hall. And with a smile, he also wondered how Jim, Ron, Neville and Hermione would react to knowing that the chief Gryffindor house elf was called Nitwit.

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After the Feast, the students made their way to their dorms. Once inside the dungeon, all the Slytherins waited patiently for Snape to deliver his opening remarks for the year. Unsurprisingly in light of recent events, they were somewhat different than normal.

"As you all no doubt realize," he said after getting the initial pleasantries out of the way, "one of our Slytherins now suffers from ... an unusual condition, one which will cause many of you to develop a psychically imposed dislike for him. One so powerful that you may feel the need to lash out at him publicly." At that, a great many of the Slytherin students turned to look at Theo who was standing in the back corner of the room by himself. Many of the looks seemed quite hostile, but if Theo felt intimidated, it did not

show in the slightest. For their part, neither Harry nor Blaise looked in his direction but instead remained focused on their Head of House.

"*However*, the Headmaster has made it clear that no allowances will be made for those who violate the school's policies on bullying and hexing fellow students simply because of the unnatural origin of your feelings.

Accordingly, whatever personal animus you may discover for the student in question, *you will not* take any actions towards him that will result in any loss of House points or any embarrassment to Slytherin house. Shun him, if you must, but any overt violence or mistreatment directed towards him that is brought to my attention will also earn my personal ire. If such should happen and you find yourself in detention with me, expect to be treated as I would treat ... well, let's just say as I would treat the typical *Gryffindor* sent to me for punishment."

At that, a surprising number of students visibly shuddered. Snape completed his remarks and then the Slytherins were sent off to their dorms. The five Third Year boys made their way in silence down the twisting corridors that led to their rooms, and as the school had announced during the summer, they each now had a separate room with their names printed on their respective doors. Theo's room was at one end with Crabbe and Goyle's rooms at the opposite end and Harry's room in the middle. Theo entered his private room, idly wondering what wards he could put on it to keep interlopers from breaking in. Once inside, he flopped onto his bed and exhaled. So far, the first day had gone better than he'd expected, but it looked like it was going to be a long year. He had actually written to Harry, Blaise, and his other Slytherin friends, instructing them to avoid him until they knew the lay of the land, and he'd been pleased to have made some new friends in Ravenclaw and

Hufflepuff who seemed interested in protecting him when he was outside of the dungeon. But in the dungeon, he was isolated and vulnerable, and he still didn't know what could be done about it.

Suddenly, his gloomy thoughts were interrupted by a creaking sound coming from his right. Out of reflex, he pulled his wand and pointed in that direction. To his surprise, a part of the wall opened inwards like a door, and then Harry Potter and Blaise Zabini stepped through, the latter carrying a small cardboard box.

"What the ...? Harry! Blaise!" Theo jumped up in surprise, as Harry stepped forward with a grin and pulled him into a hug. Blaise was less emotive, but he still shook Theo's hand warmly.

"So, I'm not even going to guess. How in Merlin's name did you get a secret passage into my room installed?" the boy asked.

Harry gave a self-satisfied smile. "Nothing to it. I just asked a house elf *very nicely*, and he installed it. Apparently, it's basically nothing for a house elf high up enough in their hierarchy to rearrange the architecture of certain parts of the castle. Tweak had already been given authority by Dumbledore to reconfigure the dungeons to give us separate rooms, and it was no problem for him to make a few additional modifications so that we can come and go with some discretion."

"Tweak?" Theo asked in amazement. "And what other *modifications*?"

Harry didn't answer. Instead, with a smug expression, he walked around Theo's bed to the opposite wall and pulled

on a sconce. A second hidden door opened up leading to a dark corridor.

"Right," Harry said. "This way. **LUMOS!**" Without further explanation, he led his two friends down a dark winding corridor which eventually ended in another door that opened onto the end of Prefect's Row, right next to the door to the Prince's Lair.

"I figured maybe we were placing too much strain on the Lair's Notice-Me-Not defenses. Last year, Miranda Bonnevie figured out that we were spending a lot of time down this way, even if she never could imagine there was a secret room down here. This way, we can come and go as we please without attracting any attention."

"Particularly since you don't know yet if Titus Mitchell and Serena Harper will be as eager to join your little cabal as Marcus and Missy were," Blaise added.

Harry frowned. "Yeah, there is that. I feel good about Serena. She technically owes me for her being Prefect. Titus is another matter. But that's something to worry about later." With that, Harry turned to the Hydra Throne and hissed out an affectionate greeting. The nine snake-heads each hissed their replies, some friendlier than others. Meanwhile, Blaise set his box down on the table and removed two small objects which he placed on the floor against the wall. After two quick Finites, they instantly grew into a Wizarding Wireless and an enchanted mini-fridge which Blaise then opened to retrieve three ice-cold butterbeers.

"Okay then," Harry said as he popped the top off of his butterbeer before sitting down opposite his two friends.

"Now lets brainstorm on how we beat this Ultimate Sanction rubbish."

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Much later, the three boys returned to their respective rooms. It was nearly midnight, and Harry was ready for bed when he heard a soft chime coming from his trunk. He shook his head, annoyed at his forgetfulness. He'd promised to check in as soon as he was settled. He opened the trunk, and from a small compartment, he removed a handheld silver mirror. He tapped it three times and the chiming stopped. Then, the mirror's surface rippled and changed to replace Harry's reflection with the image of Regulus Black.

"Hey, Regulus," Harry said. "I'm sorry I forgot to check in. It's been a long day."

"That's alright, Harry. Sirius has already fallen asleep, but do please call him in the morning or he'll whine about it all day."

"Sure thing. Also, your idea worked like a charm. Tweak remembered both you and Mr. Malfoy, and has agreed to do me some minor favors on your behalf, at least until I become Prince myself. There's now a secret passage that leads to the Lair."

"Good," Regulus said. "I wasn't entirely sure that would work. Neither Lucius nor I needed such innovations. We were already prefects when we each became Prince so getting to the Lair discreetly wasn't an issue. We both just abused our authority over Tweak to get free snacks delivered to the Lair." He paused. "I haven't mentioned this to Sirius, but what's this I've heard about a dementor on the Hogwarts Express."

Harry laid back on the bed and began his tale.

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## ***2 September 1993***

### ***Divination Class***

To Hermione Granger's surprise, Divination was one of the more popular electives – so much so that it was one of the few electives that actually had separate classes for each of the four Houses, as opposed to the far more demanding Ancient Runes class which was so sparsely attended that all four Houses could meet as one. From what Blaise had told her, this was because the Divination instructor was incompetent and would accept as an answer to an exam question nearly anything from a student who was, as he put it, "a committed bullshit artist." In other words, it was an easy O.

And so it was that she found herself sharing a stuffy, incense-choked classroom with nearly every Gryffindor Third Year. She and Neville were sharing a small table and seated rather uncomfortably on overstuffed cushions, and the experience reminded her of when her parents had taken her to a particularly bad Moroccan restaurant many years before. Her impression did not improve when Professor Sibyl Trelawney, complete with Coke-bottle glasses and a voluminous shawl that made her look like a stock gypsy caricature from a bad Hollywood movie, entered the room.

"Welcome!" she said. "How nice to see you in the physical world at last. My name is Sibyl Trelawney. You may not have seen me before. I find that descending too often into the hustle and bustle of the main school clouds my Inner Eye."

No one said anything, though Ron and Jim looked at one another as if each were daring the other to snicker out loud. Undaunted, Trelawney continued.



"So you have chosen to study Divination, the most difficult of all magical arts. I must warn you at the outset that if you do not have the Sight, there is very little I will be able to teach you. Books can only take you so far in this field ..."

At that, nearly the entire class glanced at Hermione, the notorious Gryffindor bookworm, who sat primly on her cushion, seemingly unfazed by the teacher's remarks.

"Many witches and wizards, talented though they are in the area of loud bangs and smells and sudden disappearings, are yet unable to penetrate the veiled mysteries of the future. It is a Gift granted to few." Suddenly, she turned on Neville. "You, boy! Is your grandmother well?"

Neville swallowed. "I think so."

Trelawney looked doubtful. "I wouldn't be so sure if I were you, dear." Neville gulped, and Hermione looked back and forth between the two with a frown.

Seemingly oblivious to the effect her ominous words had on Neville, the professor moved on to outlining the curriculum, stopping only briefly to give Parvati Patil an enigmatic warning about a red-haired man. She finished with a prediction of a nasty bout of flu that would be coming in February, followed by a warning that "around Easter, one of our number will leave use forever." Then, she began the day's class on reading tea leaves before asking Lavender Brown to fetch her a large tea pot from a shelf.

"Incidentally, that thing you are dreading – it will happen on Friday the sixteenth of October."

Lavender trembled, and Hermione's frown deepened into a scowl. Trelawney gave a brief overview of how to properly read tea leaves according to *Unfogging the Future* before

directing the students to each take teacups for themselves. "Oh, and dear," she said to Neville as he rose to his feet, "after you've broken your first cup, would you be so kind as to select one of the blue-patterned ones? I'm rather attached to the pink."

Somewhat befuddled by her comment, Neville headed over to the shelf containing the tea cups to be used in the day's lesson, with Hermione following close behind. Meanwhile, Trelawney went to a corner to retrieve a broom and dustpan only to freeze in surprise on her way back. As she had predicted, Neville did indeed knock a teacup off the shelf ... only for it to practically fall into Hermione's hand before she smoothly replaced it on the shelf and then selected a cup of her own.

"Whew!" said Neville. "Thanks, Hermione. That would have been embarrassing."

As the two made their way back to their seats, Trelawney stared at them both while still holding the unneeded broom and dustpan. For several seconds, a nervous silence descended over the room as the professor stared practically slackjawed. Finally, Hermione coughed delicately.

"Is there ... a problem, Professor Trelawney?" she asked cautiously.

"You caught the cup before it fell," Trelawney said as if Hermione had performed some heretofore impossible feat of magic. "How?"

Hermione blinked a few times at the question. "Um, well, you did just say that Neville would break a teacup. I assumed you meant that as a prophecy, so I paid attention in case he did knock something over, and luckily, I was

standing next to him and could catch it in time." Trelawney continued to stare. "Was that ... wrong, Professor?"

Trelawney's face crumpled as if she were suddenly on the verge of tears. "Oh, my child. My wonderful child. Please forgive me. When you first came in, I perceived very little aura around you. Very little receptivity to the resonances of the future. Yet now, I realize that your Inner Eye is much more perspicacious than I had realized."

"It is?" Hermione asked somewhat dubiously.

"Most definitely, my dear. Indeed, you may well have the markings of a truly gifted seer!"

"I may?" Hermione asked even more dubiously.

"Oh yes, most definitely!" Trelawney turned to address the whole class. "All of you, pay close attention to this gifted young prophetess! I believe we shall all see great things from her."

And indeed, everyone in the classroom focused their attention on Hermione Granger, Seer, who blushed rather profusely at all the attention. When Trelawney moved away to resume her lesson, Hermione leaned over towards Neville who was regarding her with a mild awe.

"I think if I had it to do over again," she whispered. "I'd have just let the cup hit the floor."

Soon after, however, the excitement over Hermione the Seer was eclipsed by a new controversy, as the leaves in Jim Potter's teacup appeared to show both a raven and a rat, which Professor Trelawney identified as omens of gloom, despondency, treachery, failure and death. Indeed, she was so overcome by the dire portents she saw in Jim's cup that

she ended class after just twenty minutes, and a grim and frightened mood settled over most of the Gryffindors and especially Jim (but not Hermione who insisted that she didn't see either a raven or a rat in the tea leaves but instead just two indistinct smudges). Indeed, the pall over the class did not lift until the start of their first Transfiguration lesson, at which point Professor McGonagall bluntly told the class that Trelawney had predicted a student's death every year she'd been employed at the school and so far none of those predictions had come true. On the bright side, if Jim happened to die at any point, he would be excused from that day's homework assignment.

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### ***Care of Magical Creatures***

Soon, Hermione's status as Sybil Trelawney's new *protégé* was all over the school, with several students asking her to make predictions which she flatly refused to do. Not even for Lavender Brown who was in terror over the prospect of "that thing" she was dreading happening in only six weeks time, even though the girl couldn't actually identify *anything* that she was actually "dreading" at the moment. Finally, Hermione ordered Lavender to sit down at lunch and make a list of all the things she was worried about and they'd go over it in their dorm room later that night. Later that afternoon, she finally had a class with Harry and Blaise, both of whom were bemused by her new reputation. As she neared the muddy paddock where their first CoMC class was to be held, she could hear Jim, Ron and Neville discussing their Divination class with Harry and Blaise.

"Good afternoon, Seeress Granger," Blaise called out mockingly. "Any predictions about what will happen in our

first Care of Magical Creatures class under our new and potentially hazardous professor?"

"No," she said irritably. "Only a prediction about what will happen to *you* if you keep calling me Seeress Granger."

All the boys laughed. "Seriously, though," said Harry. "What happened?"

The girl shrugged. "Professor Trelawney made some sort of vague prediction about Neville breaking a teacup. I happened to be standing next to him when he knocked one off a shelf, and I caught it. Which apparently is enough to make me the new Oracle of Delphi."

"Come on, Hermione," said Neville. "It was pretty awesome how you caught that cup and just put it back on the shelf as if it were nothing."

"It *was* nothing," she said with a huff. "Neville, you learning the Patronus Charm by the age of twelve is awesome. Me catching a cup before it hit the floor after someone had *just told* me it might get knocked of? Is *not*!"

Their discussion was cut short when Hagrid arrived, and after a brief introduction, he asked everyone to open their books.

"How?!" Pansy Parkinson asked in an obnoxious tone as she brandished her copy of *The Monster Book of Monsters* which was bound up with a thick leather belt. Even still, it growled angrily through its bindings.

"Did yeh not figger out how to open yer book?" Hagrid asked in surprise. "Ye gots to rub the spine!"

"Well how were we supposed to know that!" Pansy said furiously only to look around in shock as she realized that every other student present either already had their books open or were otherwise still in the process of rubbing the spines of their books to calm them. Even Crabbe and Goyle had seemingly solved the problem.

"Hmm. Looks ter me like ever'one else had no problems with 'em. One point from Slytherin fer bein' unprepared."

"To be fair, Mr. Hagrid," said Lavender Brown. "I only know how to open my book because Hermione sent me a letter telling me how." There was mumbled agreement from the entire class who all sheepishly admitted that the young Muggleborn had sent each of them an owl to let them know how to open their CoMC books. For her part, Hermione claimed that she'd been stumped herself until she sent an owl to the publisher, and she forwarded the proper instructions to the others. Even Crabbe and Goyle had gotten a letter from her as they both sheepishly admitted.

"Well why didn't you send a letter to *me*?!" Parkinson whined.

"I don't know, Parkinson," Hermione replied loftily. "Perhaps because in our first two years at school, you and I haven't had more than four conversations, and none at all in which you didn't insult my parentage with some vulgarity."

Pansy's mouth opened but nothing came out. "Ack!" she finally said.

With the issue of how to open the textbooks resolved, Hagrid proceeded into the lesson which, to the amazement of the class, was about hippogriffs. All of the students seemed both awestruck and terrified by the herd of magnificent winged beasts that the half-giant escorted out

of the woods. He then gave a brief but thorough (and surprisingly erudite, for Hagrid anyway) lecture on the creatures before explaining how to safely approach one. In particular, it was vitally important to be "polite" and "respectful" because hippogriffs could sense disrespect and even become violent in response to insults despite not being able to truly understand human speech.

Most of the class paid rapt attention, but Pansy Parkinson seemed to be ignoring Hagrid completely in favor of angrily whispering to Crabbe and Goyle, both of whom were trying to ignore her. Apparently, she was still miffed that none of her fellow Slytherins warned her about how to open her textbook.

"Shhh!" Hermione finally hissed at the other girl when her whispers became too loud. In response, Pansy stuck out her tongue, causing Hermione to roll her eyes in exasperation.

"Right then," Hagrid said after completing his lecture and then untying one of the hippogriffs. "Who wants to go first? We'll start with Buckbeak here." Sensibly, most of the class took a step back. All except Jim Potter, who looked around in surprise and confusion as he realized he was now at the front of the group by himself.

"Oh what the heck," he said amiably. "I'll do it. Just nobody tell my Mum." And with that, the Boy-Who-Lived strode forward confidently while trying to ignore the whispers behind him about that morning's "death omens."

"Remember, Jim," Harry called out. "Be polite and respectful. You know, sort of the opposite of how you normally act."

Jim snickered at that, but once he drew near the proud hippogriff, his good cheer faded about and he swallowed

nervously. Fortunately for him, he had paid close attention to the lecture and continued to listen carefully to Hagrid's every instruction. He bowed before the hippogriff respectfully, and after one long tense moment, Buckbeak bowed back to him. Soon after, a pleased Hagrid lifted Jim off the ground and planted him on Buckbeak's back, and to the boy's surprise and delight, the hippogriff took off and carried him on a quick flight around the area.

"Dammit," Harry muttered sourly. "Now I'll *have* to do the same thing just to maintain social parity with Jim."

"Come on, Harry," said Ron. "Why wouldn't you want to fly a hippogriff now that you know it's safe?"

Harry snorted. "Because there's a difference between seeing my brother do something and '*knowing it's safe.*' We both know my sense of self-preservation is much more highly developed than his."

As Jim came in for a landing, Pansy snorted contemptuously. "Honestly, there's obviously nothing to it. If *he* can get one of those smelly beasts to do his bidding, *anyone* can!"

"Did you even listen to a *single word* Professor Hagrid said about how to handle a hippogriff?" Hermione asked in an irritated voice.

"Hmmf! If he's a *professor*, I'm Circe reborn!" the Pureblood spat hatefully. "And anyway, no one asked *you*." She didn't say "Mudblood" aloud, but she did mouth it where only Hermione could see before stalking away from the others and towards the hippogriff that Jim had just ridden.

"*It's like arguing with a dining room table!*" Hermione muttered softly through her gritted teeth. "*A bigoted inbred*



*dining room table!"*

Jim practically ran up to Ron, Harry, and Blaise in excitement while several other students were cautiously making their to the paddock and the other hippogriffs. While he started talking animatedly and answering the other boys' questions, Hermione edged over to them, never taking her eyes off Pansy's departing form.

"So what was it like?" Harry said.

"Um, guys?" Hermione said.

"Ha! Like riding a big smelly broom with no stabilizers, and one that you couldn't grab with your hands without making it mad at you!"

"So like riding a Cleansweep?" Ron asked in apparent seriousness.

"Filthy beast! I'll show them how it's done!" Pansy said to no one.

"Guys?!" Hermione said more urgently.

"I wonder if you can saddle and bridle a hippogriff," Blaise said speculatively.

"And when this class is over, I'm going straight to the Owlery to let Daddy know all about this disgusting halfbreed teacher!" Pansy grumbled loudly to herself.

"Harry?! Blaise?!" Hermione said with very great urgency.

"Just a second, Hermione," Harry answered without looking at her. "From the way Hagrid talked, I wouldn't think they would tolerate a saddle."

"Yeah," Jim added. "Besides, I don't see how a horse's bridle would work on an animal with a beak."

"Jim?! Ron?!" Hermione said almost frantically as Pansy strode up to Buckbeak.

"After all, if Jim Potter could do it, any idiot could! Isn't that right, *you big stupid brute!*"

"RAAAAAAWCK!"

"AAAAAHH!"

"***PROTEGO!***"

With that, everyone finally noticed what was going on as a brilliant shield materialized between Pansy Parkinson and the furious Buckbeak just a second before his mighty talons could strike the girl. Surprised by the magical barrier, Buckbeak jumped back even as Parkinson fell backwards to the ground. Instantly, Hermione released her shield and cast another spell. "***ACCIO STUPID GIRL!***"

In response, Parkinson slid through almost thirty feet of muddy soil and hippogriff droppings before coming to a stop at Hermione's feet. Meanwhile, Hagrid ran forward and grappled Buckbeak around the neck before it could pursue the girl.

"What is *wrong* with you?!" Hermione exclaimed in a fury.

"Hagrid *just said* you have to be polite with a hippogriff or it might attack! Are you stupid, suicidal or both?!"

"How *dare* you talk to me that way, you filthy ...!" Pansy began only to freeze at the sight of Hermione's wand pointed right between her eyes.

"Do *not* use that word around me, Pansy Parkinson. Not after I just saved your miserable hide from getting ripped apart by a hippogriff due to your own blazing stupidity!"

"Ere now," Hagrid called out. "What happened over 'er?" He had just gotten Buckbeak calmed down and was heading over to where Hermione and Pansy were in a stand-off. Soon, other children were gathering around as well. To her surprise, Pansy didn't seem to have much backup. Trying to salvage her wounded pride, she turned on Hagrid angrily.

"What happened, '*Professor*,' is that your wretched hippogriff, that we should have never been exposed to as Third Years, nearly *killed me*!"

"No," Hermione interrupted coolly. "What happened is that this idiot marched up to Buckbeak and called it '*a big stupid brute*' and then was surprised when it attacked her because she completely ignored the lecture at the start of class!"

"Ye called a hippogriff a big stupid brute!" Hagrid bellowed. "Ye'r lucky you tweren't torn limb from limb!"

"Hah! So you admit it!" Pansy exclaimed victoriously. "I could have been *killed* because of your incompetence!"

"But you weren't, though," Harry said in a speculative tone. "Because Hermione saved your life."

"How did you get a shield spell up so fast?" Parvati asked in a somewhat awestruck tone.

Hermione waved off the question. "It was nothing. I realized at once what was about to happen and was ready for it."

Lavender gasped. "Ah! I knew it! You *are* a Seer. You foresaw Pansy getting killed and saved her! Just like

Neville's cup!"

"What?!" Hermione did a double-take. "No. No, no, no. *No!* I didn't foresee anything. I just observed a rude obnoxious girl striding up to an animal that attacks people who insult it and realized what would happen. That's not divination. It's just ... common sense!"

"Nevertheless," Harry said. "You did save Pansy's life, didn't you?"

"Oh, I don't know," Hermione shrugged. "She might have just been hurt or something. I'm sure Madam Pomfrey could have patched her up with no problem."

"Don't you dare try to minimize the threat to my life!" Pansy shouted before turning back to Hagrid. "Your beast nearly *killed* me!"

"Indeed," Harry continued with a smile. "Was anyone else paying attention to Pansy? Did anyone else even have a wand out?"

The answer to both questions seemed to be 'no.' Suddenly, Blaise grinned as he figured out what Harry had already realized. "Oh, Harry. Please tell me you're thinking what I'm thinking!"

"What?" Pansy said in a low suspicious voice. "What are you thinking?"

Harry turned to her with a slightly evil smile. "I'm thinking, Pansy Parkinson, that you have just declared in front of witnesses that you would have died just now had you not been saved by Hermione Granger, who was the only one who was in a position to save you. I'm thinking that as a result, Pansy, you owe Hermione a life debt."

"WHAT?!" Pansy and Hermione exclaimed in unison. Hermione turned back angrily at the other girl only to watch in amazement as Pansy fainted dead away.

Hermione gave a sigh of deep frustration. "First Neville's cup. Now this. It's like I'm being punished for doing good deeds."

"A valuable and important realization, Granger," said Blaise with a grin. "Finally, you're starting to think like a Slytherin."

## Chapter End Notes

AN1: Parts of Dumbledore's speech, Trelawney's introduction and Hagrid's first class were taken from Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban. Pretty much all the bits that sound familiar.

## Feasts, Electives (pt 2)

### CHAPTER 16: Feasts, Electives and Student Organizations (pt 2)

***2 September 1993***

***5:00 p.m.***

As the Third Year Gryffindors entered the foyer to the castle after their adventure with Hagrid's hippogriffs, they were met by a scowling Malachi Sturgeon and his hideous cat (who apparently went by the name of Mr. Crookshanks), both of whom seemed mortally offended by the amount of mud they were tracking into the building.

"Just look at all this *filth!*" the man roared in a fury. "Vandals, the lot of you!" As the various Gryffindors mumbled their apologies, the caretaker shook his head and then pointed at Jim. "You, boy! Come with me!" And with that, Sturgeon turned and stormed off without waiting for Jim's response. The Boy-Who-Lived blinked in confusion before turning to his friends with a shrug and then heading after the caretaker.

Moments later, he followed the man into the cramped office that had previously belonged to Argus Filch. To Jim's surprise, it was even messier than when Filch had occupied it, mainly because a large cabinet that bore the label "*Confiscated and Extremely Dangerous*" had been cleaned out, its contents spread out across every work surface as if Sturgeon had been searching for some particular bit of contraband.

"Snot-nosed little hellions!" the man snapped as he gently dropped his cat down to the floor before turning back

towards Jim with a sneer. "Why back in my day, detentions would have been spent hanging in the dungeons by your thumbs!"

Jim stared at the strange man for a few seconds before speaking. "Begging your pardon, Mr. Sturgeon, sir, but when exactly did you go to Hogwarts if they were still torturing the students? Because Mr. Filch's complaints to the contrary, I'm pretty sure they stopped hanging students by their thumbs quite a long time ago."

Sturgeon's face twisted into a snarl of rage ... before he suddenly lost his composure and burst into laughter. "Yes, alright, I suppose that was a bit over the top. I thought it best to adopt an attitude similar to my predecessor's – the better to make students wish to avoid me so they wouldn't take too much interest in our activities – but honestly, it's a struggle to keep a straight face while doing an Argus Filch impersonation."

Jim blinked in confusion. "*Our* ... activities?"

The other man tilted his head as if intrigued by Jim's response. "You *really* have no idea who I am, do you?"

"I know you're the new caretaker," he said cautiously. "Should I know you from anywhere else?"

"Extraordinary," the man said with some degree of amazement. "Simply extraordinary."

Before Jim could say any more, Sturgeon swiftly reached into the inner pocket of his shabby coat and pulled out a folded sheet of paper which he handed over to the boy. With some hesitation, Jim unfolded the paper and read the words written on it. Then, he looked back and forth between the

paper and the man in front of him in confusion before his face finally lit up with recognition and delight.

"Bloody hell!" he exclaimed with a laugh. The caretaker made a sour face and clucked his tongue at the outburst.

"Language, Jim," chided Remus Lupin.

---

Meanwhile, back in the Great Hall, Ron had taken a seat next to Hermione, though he had saved a seat on his other side for Jim (and had practically growled at a Firstie who tried to claim it only to back away fearfully).

"I hope Jim's okay with that new caretaker," he said. "Guy's as creepy as Old Filchy but not half as old and worn down."

"I'm sure Jim is perfectly safe with Mr. Sturgeon," Hermione said confidently as she picked up a pitcher of pumpkin juice. But then, she paused for a moment and stared at the pitcher for several seconds intently before putting it back. "On second thought, I think I'll stick with water," she said with a frown.

Ron nodded and handed her a nearby water jug while he thought about how to proceed.

"So," he finally said, "will you be doing your study group thing again this year?"

"Hmm? I'm not sure. If I do, it won't be as intensive as it has the last two years. I've got a very heavy course load."

Ron thought that was an understatement – according to the rumor mill, Hermione Granger was taking *every* elective. He had assumed that required some sort of time travel magic until Percy had said that (a) time travel was



impossible and (b) both he and Bill had done the same thing as Third Years. It was doable but exhausting, and Percy had described it as being worse than his Fifth Year OWL preparations.

"Well, see, the thing is," Ron stammered nervously, "I was kinda hoping that maybe I could join your group this year."

"I thought you were already in a study group with Jim and Lavender Brown."

"Actually, that stopped last year after that whole Heir of Slytherin rubbish. Lavender's family made her stop talking to Jim. It was ... unpleasant." Ron grimaced. "Also, she kinda got mad at me for asking to copy off her a few times."

Hermione sniffed delicately. "Well, I hope you're not planning to copy off me," she said in a lecturing tone. "The point of an education is to learn to do your own work."

"I know, I know! And I wouldn't do that. I know education is important."

She smiled and shook her head. "Is that why you're taking Divination and Care of Magical Creatures? The two easiest O's that Hogwarts offers?"

"Yes! I mean ... No!" Ron exclaimed with embarrassment. "That is ..." He paused to look around to see if anyone was listening before leaning towards Hermione.

"I want to be a healer," he whispered.

Hermione opened her mouth to respond but then paused in confusion. "I ... you ... What?"

Ron swallowed nervously. "I want to be a healer someday. That means interning with Madam Pomfrey after OWLS and then getting an apprenticeship at St. Mungo's after I graduate. I'm taking easy electives because stuff like Ancient Runes and Arithmancy won't help me with either of those, but I *absolutely have* to get O's on my OWLS for Potions, Charms, and Herbology to even have a chance."

Hermione stared at Ron for several seconds almost as if she'd never seen him before. "Ron ... I had no idea." She thought for a moment and then nodded her head. "Alright, I still don't know if I'm working with a study group, but ... if you need extra help, I can tutor you. I'll just find some extra time somewhere." Her expression turned stern. "But no copying off my papers!"

Ron grinned. "Sure thing."

Hermione continued to study Ron for several seconds as if considering options. "I'll tell you what though. In exchange for tutoring, would you be willing to do something for me?"

"Name it."

"Well, you see, I'm starting this club ..."

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"What sort of club?" Neville asked. "I know Hermione's starting a group of some kind..."

"This one's different," Lavender said. "In some ways, quite the opposite."

Oliver Wood jumped in. "Ya see, after that business on the Express platform yesterday, some of us were thinking that the Muggleborns and Halfblood students got bent out of shape over No-Name because they weren't raised in our

culture and don't really understand it. So some of us got together and decided that maybe we need a club of our own so that we can teach one another about our various family traditions and stuff like that. That way, maybe we'd be better able to explain how things work in the wizard world to those raised outside it."

"So ... you want to start a Pureblood club?" Neville inquired cautiously. "Isn't there a bad history around that idea?"

"No!" Lavender exclaimed almost offended. "Nothing bigoted or gross like that. This is all just about celebrating our own heritage and shared history and stuff. Nothing ... Death Eatery."

Neville opened his mouth to ask whether "Death Eatery" was actually proper English, but then, over Lavender's shoulder, he happened to notice Theo sitting alone at the Slytherin table. His mouth slapped shut into an annoyed grimace.

"I'll think about it," he finally said.

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### ***In the Caretaker's Office...***

Jim and Remus were having an enjoyable meal to themselves (delivered by house elves), and the boy was still marveling at how Remus had concealed his true identity.

"I just can't believe that the Headmaster hid your real name behind a Fidelius!" he said while looking down once more at the scrap of paper that said *Malachi Sturgeon is actually the werewolf Remus Lupin*. "I mean, I could see you and everything, but I just couldn't make the connection."

"Honestly, I can hardly believe it myself," Remus replied. "I was, of course, aware of the Fidelius, though I was abroad when your parents used it to make Sirius their Secret Keeper. But I was shocked when Professor Dumbledore explained that he could use it to conceal identities and other secrets. While it's in place and he remains my Secret Keeper, no one will recognize me as Remus Lupin, and no one will guess that Malachi Sturgeon is a werewolf no matter how many times I miss work for the full moon. Which I suspect will make dealing with Professor Snape much easier for us both."

"It's kinda creepy though," Jim said with a shudder. "If you can conceal that sort of information so easily with a Fidelius, a dark wizard could cause all sorts of problems with it."

"True, but the Headmaster assured me that very few wizards could cast a Fidelius at all and only a handful of people in the world could alter it for secrets other than hidden locations. The spell is also limited in that a person can be Secret Keeper for one secret at a time, a person can only have one Secret to be Kept at a time, and the person who cast the spell can only maintain one iteration of it at a time. So I feel relatively confident that we need not fear dark wizards abusing this Charm any time soon."

Jim nodded and changed the subject. "So you've told me - or shown me, I guess - your secret. When are you going to tell Harry? And Ron too, I hope, but I know you wanted to reconnect with Harry."

Remus looked away. "I ... will. But I'd like to get to know him first." He sighed. "Frankly, I'm a bit worried that he might think poorly of me for leaving Britain while he was left with..."

"He won't," Jim interrupted confidently. "He'll understand about what happened. About what Mum and Dad ... well, you know." He looked at Remus cautiously. "Are you planning on telling Mum you're here? I won't be surprised if you're keeping Dad in the dark, but you are working here with my mother after all."

"I haven't decided yet. To be honest, I think it might ... simplify things for now if I kept the number of people who know my secret to a minimum. You, Ron, and eventually Harry. In the meantime, we'll need to set up a schedule of Wu Xi Do lessons for you. And also animagus training if you're still bent on that. And since it will have to be a secret, we'll have to figure out some system for getting you detentions that can be served with me."

Jim laughed. "No fear. I've never had much trouble getting detentions in the past." Then, he glanced over to the empty cabinet against the wall. "So what's with that? Was there something *Confiscated and Extremely Dangerous* in particular you were looking for?"

Remus shrugged wistfully. "Just an idle fancy. There was something that I helped make that I was rather proud of that Filch took from your father in 1976. It was foolish to think Filch had actually held onto it all these years. I imagine he destroyed it after we graduated."

"Oh? What was it?"

---

### ***The Slytherin table in the Great Hall ...***

While going over some Quidditch plays with Adrian Pucey, Harry happened to glance down towards the "Junior Death Eater" end of the table in time to make eye contact with Gregory Goyle, and the boy quickly mouthed "*can we talk?*"

in an unfortunately obvious manner that Harry hoped no one else noticed. He responded with a discrete nod and then ignored Goyle completely for the rest of dinner. Afterwards, he managed to catch the other boy away from Crabbe and the rest of their circle and pull him into an empty classroom, which Harry promptly sealed off with several privacy spells.

"We really need to work on your subtlety, Greg," Harry finally said.

Goyle ignored the dig. "You promised that if I spied for you, you'd help save Amy from a forced marriage. Have you gotten anywhere?"

"Well, first of all, you haven't actually done much in the way of spying for quite a while since Draco has transferred schools. However, I have promised to do everything I can for Amy, and I will. I have ... plans in place for dealing with that, but I'm not in an position to put them into action right this moment. I was under the impression we had until next summer. Has something changed?"

Greg looked dismayed. "No, at least not about the date. Lord Nott wants to wait until after she turns thirteen next June. I guess he thinks that will make it less ... gross, I suppose, if she's officially a teenager. But he wants to meet her *next month*. My father said that on Halloween, the day of the first Hogsmeade visit, he'll get permission for her to come even though she's a Second Year. I'm to escort her to the Three Broomsticks so that Nott, Amy and my family can all have lunch together and he and Amy can ... get to know each other."

Goyle shuddered at that, while Harry made a face and once again renewed his personal vow to destroy Tiberius Nott

someday.

"So long as it's just lunch, we'll get through it. I'll be in Hogsmeade and stay near the Three Broomsticks. If he tries anything more than a simple lunch date, I'll ... well, I'll think of something. Otherwise, we stick to the original plan."

"Yeah," Goyle said urgently, "but what *is* the original plan. You haven't told me *anything* about what you're going to do."

"No, Greg, and I don't plan to. I'm sorry, but you're just going to have to trust me."

The other boy was visibly unhappy, but he nodded his acceptance.

---

Later, another meeting took place as Harry finally introduced the Seventh Year prefects, Titus Mitchell and Selena Harper, to the Prince's Lair and the books and other items it contained. Also present were Blaise and Theo, the later of whom caused a bit of controversy by his presence. Neither prefect was from a family affected by the Ultimate Sanction – Mitchell was a Half-blood and Harper a Pureblood, but neither of their families had any oath bonds to either the Wizengamot or any of its member families. Still, both of them noted that the clear majority of Slytherins would be affected, and neither of them relished becoming tainted by the Sanction's side effects while on the cusp of graduating. After some discussion, it was agreed that the two prefects would show public disdain for Theo when among other Slytherins but would also punish house members who bullied him because of "strict orders from Snape and Dumbledore."

As Serena and Titus were leaving, Harry spoke up. "I almost forgot. The password to get in and out of the Lair is *fierce blue puppy*."

The two 7th Years looked at each other in confusion. "What is the significance of that phrase?" Mitchell asked.

"There isn't any. I just picked three random words from the dictionary. But last year, I tried to be clever with the password, and it bit me. So this year, I'm trying to be more sensible about security."

After the prefects' departure, Blaise turned to Harry. "Okay, now that they're gone, we can get to something that we should have talked about before now, but I'd been giving you the chance to be the one to bring it up. What do you know about the Azkaban breakout?"

Harry looked at him blandly. "What makes you think I know *anything* about the Azkaban breakout?"

"Well, you haven't been brainstorming with us ever since the breakout occurred trying to figure out who was behind it or what their goal is. Nor have you actually shown any particular concern about it. And your father is Chief Auror and your brother is the Boy-Who-Lived, so I'm sure you know more than anyone outside the government."

Harry made a face. "Speaking purely hypothetically, if I did know anything about it, I couldn't share it with either of you."

"Why?" asked Theo. "Oaths or something?"

"Or something," Harry answered vaguely.



Blaise stared at him aghast. "Oh for the love of ... You're *involved*! You're actually involved personally in the escape of the worst five Death Eaters in Azkaban!"

"*Technically*," thought Harry, "*it was only the worst four*." Of course, he also knew that Blaise had never credited Harry's suspicion that Sirius Black might be innocent.

"Blaise, Theo," he finally said, "you have both put a lot of trust in me so far. I'm going to ask you to trust me now that there is nothing I can say to you about the Azkaban breakout and so stop asking me questions about the topic."

It was indeed a testament to the two boys' faith in Harry Potter that they grudgingly agreed to his request, though Theo did have one bleak warning.

"But *speaking purely hypothetically*, Harry, if you *did* have something to do with the breakout, don't ever get caught. Or else people might actually hate you worse than *me*!"

---

Meanwhile, in Gryffindor Tower, Hermione was grudgingly reviewing a list of the seventeen things that Lavender Brown most dreaded. The girl had stopped at seventeen because she honestly couldn't think of any more things she might be dreading, and the seventeenth item was, in fact, "*something I haven't thought of that I won't remember until October 16th when it's too late*." Reviewing the list, Hermione reviewed each individual dread, asked a few questions for clarification, and then jotted down some notes for things she thought Lavender could perhaps do to prevent anything bad from happening.

A few of them, she simply marked through with a quill. When Lavender asked why, she said "I understand why you might be dreading your OWLS and NEWTS, but even if you

do fail them, you won't find out about it for years to come, so that's not something that can happen by the 16th of October," a logical point that Lavender accepted. Finally, Hermione got to the penultimate item – Number 16: *Binky*.

"And what, pray tell, is a *Binky*?" Hermione inquired while trying to keep any hint of disdain from her voice.

"Binky is my new pet rabbit. My parents got him for me this summer, but they wouldn't let me bring it to Hogwarts. He's still young and small, and my stupid little brother Elwood keeps taking him out of his hutch to play with him and forgetting to latch it properly when he puts him back. Binky might get out some day and run off or get eaten by an animal."

Hermione stared at the other girl. "And you would describe this possibility as something you ... *dread*?"

Lavender shrugged. "Maybe, I guess."

The other girl sighed. "Alright then, I assume the Browns have house elves. So write home and ask your parents to order a house elf to keep an extra eye on Binky especially when Elwood is playing with him." And she wrote that instruction on the parchment, along with instructions for avoiding Dementors, gold-digging boys after her inheritance, Dragonpox, acne, and falling off the school's moving stairs. She simply marked through several other "dreads" such as You-Know-Who returning, Grindelwald returning, and Lavender flunking all her exams as things that couldn't possibly be averted or even be likely to happen before the deadline.

"So what do *you* think is the most likely danger for Lavender?" Parvati asked. Hermione looked over the list again.

"Honestly, none of them. Professor Trelawney said '*that thing you are dreading will happen on October 16th.*' I think it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. She created an expectation that something you dread will happen on that day, but the way the prophecy was worded, *any* unfortunate thing that happens will technically satisfy it. The thing you *really* dread most right now, Lavender, is hearing bad news on October 16th in fulfillment of prophecy, and it really won't matter what it is so long as you choose to view it as dreadful."

The other two girls stared at Hermione in silent amazement. "Wow, Hermione," Lavender said in a hushed voice. "You're so ... *deep*." Beside her, Parvati nodded her head furiously in agreement.

Hermione shrugged almost helplessly. "... thanks?"

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By midnight, everyone in Slytherin House was in bed and (for the most part) asleep. Alone in his room, Harry Potter wasted five fruitless minutes trying to summon his wand from its spot on his dresser before giving up. In the room next door, Theo No-Name spent a few rather more productive minutes setting up wards on his door to keep out intruders, something that was now a part of his daily routine. And in the room on the other side of Harry's, Blaise Zabini drafted a quick and completely innocuous letter to his mother about the events of his first day back before flipping the parchment over to write a second letter on the backside with invisible ink.

In another part of the dungeon, six First Year girls were sharing a room together. Four of them tossed and turned all night, their dreams troubled by a persistent feeling of terrible unease. The other two, Flora and Hestia Carrow,

slept quite well, if in a peculiar manner. For neither girl slept with her eyes closed. Instead, they both lay flat on their backs as if dead to the world, their sightless unblinking eyes staring out into the darkness that surrounded them. They slept, and in their dreams, they made plans.

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### ***3 September 1993***

#### ***Muggle Studies***

Professor Lily Potter's Muggle Studies class was during the first period of the day and required students to rise and take breakfast early. Historically, the early time was considered one reason for the class's unpopularity. Other equally valid reasons included widespread anti-Muggle bigotry and also how embarrassingly out-of-date the subject matter had been under the prior instructor (who had finally been dismissed in 1991 after admitting to having no idea what an automobile was). Despite the early start time, Professor Potter was quite pleased with the size of this year's class and also somewhat surprised that it actually included at least two children of former Death Eaters. Neither Harry nor Jim was taking her class, of course. She had informed Jim the previous year that, no, he could not take a class under his own mother just to get an easy A. Harry, on the other hand, had never expressed the slightest interest in Muggle Studies, a fact that she fought to view as completely sensible for a Muggle-raised student, no matter how insistently a voice in the back of her head suggested that it wasn't the class that turned him away but the teacher.

After checking roll, she went around the room, asking various students what they hoped to get out of the class.

Daphne Greengrass said that her family's businesses occasionally required them to interact with Muggles, and his parents expected all their children to be able to do so without drawing attention to themselves.

Ernie MacMillan said much the same.

Susan Bones said that she'd been embarrassed in the past by her ignorance about basic Muggle facts and wanted to learn more about them.

Gregory Goyle grudgingly said that his father was making him take the class. It seems a Muggle had once nearly killed him with "a ruffle" because he didn't know what it was at first. Lily assumed he'd meant "rifle" but let the mistake pass for the moment. It would do no good to embarrass a Pureblood with Goyle's background on the first day, least of all by inquiring under what circumstances Goyle Sr. had been shot at by an armed Muggle.

Hermione Granger, the only Muggleborn in the room other than Lily herself, hesitated before saying simply that she thought it would be fascinating to see what wizards actually thought about Muggles. For a moment, Lily wondered if she detected a hint of bitterness from the girl who so many people had compared to her at the same age, but when she studied Hermione's face, she saw only bland attentiveness.

And so it went, until Lily finally asked Theo No-Name, who was sitting on the back row by himself, and the boy said flatly "because I might end up living among them for the rest of my life," which caused a brief flutter of tension to pass over the room.

The introductions over, Lily began her lecture. "Let's start today with the most obvious question. Miss Bones, can you tell us what exactly a Muggle is?"

Susan swallowed a bit nervously at being picked out first. "Well, I suppose I'd say a Muggle was someone with no magic?"

"Um-hm," Lily replied thoughtfully. "So how does that definition apply to squibs?"

Susan hesitated. "Well ... squibs can't cast spells or work wands, but they do have *some* magic."

"True to a point," the teacher said. "A first generation squib can usually brew a basic potion successfully and operate most enchanted objects, though not all of them can. Such abilities are incredibly rare among second-generation squibs and unheard of among anyone in later generations. And yet, a squib is still capable of passing on a magical inheritance and siring a wizarding child, whether directly or generations later. Of course, there is little reliable evidence about how easily a squib of any generation can sire a wizarding child..."

*"In large part because our government has banned such research for centuries,"* Lily thought to herself, *"but since I don't want to get fired or worse, I'll pass over that."*

"... but there have been documented cases of supposed Muggleborns who have successfully traced their lineage back to a squib who had been born into a wizarding family as much as seven generations before."

Out of the entire class, Hermione was the only one not shocked by the teacher's words, as she had tracked her own genealogy back to a wizarding ancestor just three generations removed (for all the good it did her), but her classmates all looked at one another in surprise. She wondered how many of her Pureblooded classmates would still cling to blood supremacy after a year of this class.

*"Probably most, she thought rather cynically. "I have gotten to know them pretty well, after all."*

Professor Potter continued. "But we're straying afar from the field of Muggle studies, so let me rephrase the question. Mr. MacMillan, how long do you think Muggles have existed?"

The question obviously confused the young Hufflepuff. "I've ... never really thought about it. I suppose there have always been Muggles."

"You suppose wrong, Mr. MacMillan," Lily said lightly. "There have always been people without magic, whether they were called No-Majs, Mundanes, *Le Sans-Magie*, Langweiligmenschen, or any number of other terms, some of which were descriptive while others were meant as insulting. But we have only called them *Muggles* since 1692 or so. Can you guess why, Mr. MacMillan?"

Ernie thought for a moment and then his eyes lit up. "The Statute of Secrecy!" he exclaimed.

"Quite so. In 1692, the International Statute of Secrecy went fully into effect. I'm sure you're all aware of what an important law that was and is, but what you may not fully appreciate is that it was far more than an act of multinational legislation. The Statute of Secrecy is a *magical law*, a monumental spell of global reach backed by the combined magic of the ICW member countries. It was powered by the raw magical energies of entire nation-states, all funneled into a spell cast cooperatively by over a hundred of the most powerful and skilled witches and wizards of the day. It is quite possibly the most powerful spell ever cast in recorded history. And the power and breadth of that spell cannot be overstated."

"Literally overnight, nearly all of the world's non-magical people simply *forgot* that magic and those who could work it ever existed. Please understand: before the Statute's passage, *everyone* knew about magic. Every king and queen in Europe had a Court Wizard as part of their retinue and likely dozens of prominent wizard-folk of noble ancestry among their courtiers. In fact, John Dee, the Court Wizard and spymaster of Queen Elizabeth I had so much influence over her government that he is credited with inventing the term "*the British Empire*." Military conflicts across the globe and dating back thousands of years had employed war-wizards alongside mortal soldiers ever since the Dark Lord Sargon of Akkad became the first wizard – and one of the first *people* – to forge an empire with himself as ruler. Throughout much of human history, every sizeable village had at least one village healer or wise man or woman who was actually a self-taught wizard or witch who lived among the non-magicals. Jewish and Christian non-magicals all knew the story of the wizard Moses and the magical duels he fought against the wizards of Egypt to win his people's freedom. And then, in the space of a single day, all of the non-magicals simply ... *forgot all of it*. Legends about magic endured but only as stories. Fairytales and myths that many people knew but almost no one remembered from any personal experience."

Lily's eyes lit up as she warmed to the subject. "And it wasn't just memories. A vast number of Muggle historical records were magically edited or erased to eliminate any credible information about wizard-kind. Statues and paintings of famous wizard-folk were altered so that everyone would forget the real people depicted in them. Some wizards and witches were removed from the historical record outright while others simply had their biographies altered to excise any references to wizardry – Circe, Lao-Tse, Hermes Trismegistus, Roger Bacon, St.



Patrick, Johann Faustus, Leonardi di Vinci, and innumerable others. Parts of the Holy Bible itself that had previously discussed magic and those who worked it were edited to exclude us, and the same happened with the Torah, the Quran, the Mahabharata, the Code of Hammurabi, Magna Carta, and countless fictional and non-fictional works dating back to before the time of Homer. One of Shakespeare's plays, *Love's Labours Won*, was eliminated completely from the Muggle canon because it was a romantic comedy about star-crossed lovers attending Hogwarts together. If you're interested in Elizabethan-era views on magic, there's a surviving copy of that play in the Library."

"And *that* is when we started calling them *Muggles*. The term was derived from a medieval English word - *mug*. At the time, it meant a foolish person, specifically one who had been deceived by others. And so Muggle came to mean a non-magical person who must be tricked into disbelieving in magic. Please note the word I just used. Not someone who has been tricked or who should be tricked, but someone who *must* be tricked. Because as powerful and extraordinary as the Statute of Secrecy is, its power is not inviolate and its reach is not absolute. Individual Muggles *can* accept that magic is real if they personally observe its use. And if a sufficiently large number of Muggles ever *did* learn that magic existed, it is feared that the Statute itself would collapse and all the hidden evidence of our existence would be laid bare. In which case, the more than 5.5 *billion* Muggles in this world would instantly realize that an entire global subculture of people who could work real magic had been hiding among them invisibly for centuries. And believe me, the Muggles of 1993 are not the Muggles of 1692. They have arts and powers of their own now, and if a conflict broke out between wizards and Muggles today, there is no guarantee who would win, but either way, the entire world would be the loser."

At that, there was a snicker from one student. "Mr. Goyle? Do you have something to add?"

The boy blushed at being called out. "Sorry, Professor, but how could we lose a war against Muggles no matter how many of them there are? I mean ... they're Muggles!"

Hermione rolled her eyes at that, but she noted that while most of her Pureblooded classmates seemed to disapprove of his crudeness, none of them seemed to disagree with the content of his words. The Professor just smirked.

"And that, Mr. Goyle, is why you are here: to learn about what Muggles are, what they can do, and why they cannot be ignored or dismissed. Tell me, class, has any wizard or witch ever been to the moon?"

Most of the students laughed out loud at the suggestion, though Hermione merely smiled. She alone knew where the teacher was headed.

"That's impossible, Professor," said Ernie MacMillan. "No wizard can apparate outside the terrestrial sphere!"

"Very true, Mr. MacMillan, very true," she said. Then, she turned and waved her wand at a large scrapbook on her desk. The book flipped open, and with another wave, a particular photo was lifted up off the page and enlarged to cover the rear wall. Hermione knew the image well, but it astonished all the other students.

"This," Lily continued as she pointed at the stunning blue orb that took up most of the wall, "is the planet Earth as viewed from the surface of the moon. The gray landscape at the bottom is the lunar surface near the crater known as the Sea of Tranquility." She waved her wand again and another picture rose up to replace the first, one depicting

an astronaut on the lunar surface. "This is Neil Armstrong, an American Muggle who was the first person to walk on the Moon in July of 1969. As a nine-year-old child who knew nothing of the wizarding world, I watched television coverage of the Apollo 11 landing, as did untold millions of other Muggles. The suit Armstrong wears is called a space suit, and he had to wear it at all times while on the Moon because there is no air there and he would have died almost instantly without it."

Another wand-wave. "This is a picture of the Saturn V rocket which carried Armstrong and two others more than 225,000 miles above the Earth to reach the Moon. This rocket is about 363 feet tall. Only this small piece at the top contained the three Muggles, while most of the remaining structure was comprised of the rocket assembly. Think of these rockets as large tubes filled with a highly explosive compound that hurled the ship upwards with what can best be described as a carefully controlled detonation of unimaginable force. The entire mission lasted twenty-four days but was years in the making. The project required the work of thousands of Muggles and cost the American Muggle government the equivalent of roughly 35 million galleons in today's currency. And they put forth all that effort and expense for no reason except the spirit of exploration. To do what had never been done before."

At that, Hermione nearly raised her hand to ask a question but thought better of it. As a well-read Muggleborn she knew that there were factors other than "the spirit of exploration" behind the lunar mission – namely, the Space Race and the desire of the Americans to dominate the Soviet Union which had been the first nation to put a man into orbit. But then she realized that the global conflict between the USSR and the West might be a bit much for a

class of Purebloods, the most insulated of whom had assumed that Muggles were all illiterate peasants.

*"If nothing else," Hermione thought to herself as she noticed how speechless her classmates were, "maybe Professor Potter will at least cure them of that illusion."*

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**Ministry of Magic**  
**Aurors' Office**  
**8:45 a.m.**

As he walked past the waiting room outside the Auror Department, James Potter was surprised to see a familiar face, if one not usually seen in this part of the Ministry.

"Peter!" he exclaimed in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

The solicitor held up a bundle of parchments. "Bookkeeping matters, I'm afraid. I've completed the audit of this years charity proceeds from Jim's birthday party. I need you to sign them so I can get them filed on time. I should have contacted you yesterday, but I got held up and it totally slipped my mind."

James smiled at his best friend. "Not a problem. I don't have any meetings before 10. Come on in."

With that, James led Pettigrew into the Senior Command area of the Aurors' Office, bypassing the usual security checkpoints as they went. Soon, they were in his office, where the Chief Auror (and Trustee of the Jim Potter Charitable Trust) dutifully signed every dotted line pointed out by the solicitor and then stamped them with his Lord's ring. As he did so, Peter made a point of asking innocuous

but thoughtful questions, usually every time it looked like James might be tempted to stop and read something.

"So, any movement on the Death Eater investigation?" he asked.

"No. We're still pursuing all leads, but there hasn't been anything other than rumors and speculation since the breakout. We're about ready to shut down all international portkey operations that don't originate out of the Ministry Portkey Office, but it may be closing the gate after the hippogriffs are all gone. Besides, assuming they haven't fled the country already, they could still use an illegal portkey out of Thurso."

"Thurso?" Peter inquired, as if he didn't know the name well.

"It's a small fishing on the northern Scottish coast. It's the only point that lies outside the portkey warning system. Amelia has been saying for years that we ought to do something to close that security hole no matter how much it cost, just like Crouch before her and probably every other DMLE head since the founding of the Ministry."

"Would it really cost that much?"

James sighed. "I'm hardly a warding expert, but apparently it would require adjusting ley lines over an area of roughly 500 square miles at a cost of over 10% of the Ministry's annual budget. Oh, and also take about three years. We're probably just going to assign a permanent auror detail there instead – like we're not short on aurors as it is."

Peter nodded and fought to keep a frown off his face. If aurors were being assigned to Thurso, he might have to alter some of his plans.

"Any news on the escapees?" he asked to change the subject.

"Nothing I can share publicly."

Peter laughed. "Not even to your Seneschal?"

James smiled at his oldest remaining friend. "Sorry. If there's any news to report to the Wizengamot, you'll be the first to hear it." Then, he tilted his head and studied the other man. "Say, do you have any dinner plans? It's been a while since we've just sat and talked. Maybe we could crack a bottle of wine and reminisce about the good old Marauder days before everything went to hell."

Peter considered. "It would have to be an early dinner with not too much wine. I have a prior engagement later that evening."

"Oh?" the other man said with a saucy grin. "What's her name?"

"Get your mind out of the gutter, Potter. It's ... a business matter."

"If you say so," Potter said while wriggling his eyebrows suggestively. "The Leaky Cauldron around five? A few beers over Shepherd's Pie?"

"I look forward to it," Peter answered gamely as he shuffled the signed parchments. "But for now, I'm off to wrangle with goblin accountants for the better part of the day." He headed for the door, but James called out before he could leave.

"Peter," he said with sudden hesitation. "Thank you."

"Whatever for?" Pettigrew asked with curiosity.

"For not saying '*I told you so*' after Black's escape. As I recall, if you'd had your way, Sirius would have died in an alleyway twelve years ago. You were right about him. All the way back in Sixth Year after The Prank. I should have listened to you then."

Peter stared at James with an emotionless mask. For a brief second, he wondered where they would both be today if James had indeed listened to him all those years ago.

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**The Gryffindor Common Room**  
**15 November 1976, 1:00 a.m.**  
**(14 days after The Prank)**

"I cannot believe this," Peter said bitterly. "I absolutely cannot believe that you're just ... letting it go. Like it was *nothing*."

"It wasn't nothing, Pete," James replied. "I know it was a big deal. But it's been two weeks, and Sirius has spent every minute of it begging our forgiveness. Remus has already forgiven him. Why can't you?"

"I dunno, Prongs," the boy sneered. "Maybe because I value Remus's life more than he does himself!"

"Come on, Wormy, that's not fair," James replied without noticing the grimace Peter gave at the use of the nickname Padfoot had christened him with. "Sirius really does feel bad. And in the end, no one got hurt."

Peter glared at James only to turn away at his friend's pleading expression.

"He's a violent sadistic bully, James," the boy said in a low angry voice. "You know that, right? Remus and I have outgrown our silly Marauder pranks. You only go after Snivellus and have mostly stopped that. But your precious *Padfoot* still hexes every Slytherin who crosses his path, along with any Ravenclaws he deems too arrogant to suit him and every Hufflepuff who travels alone. He's a thug with a wand for all his precious Pureblood breeding."

James looked down, unwilling to deny outright Peter's accusations. "He says he's willing to change. That if we forgive him and let him back in the Marauders, he won't prank anyone else ever again. Come on, Pete. If you think that badly of him, then this is your chance to help him be better. To finally grow up. And besides, you know he wouldn't have done something like that to Snivelly and Moony if it hadn't been for that business with Marlene. You know how that must have affected his judgment. Despite everything, we're all friends, and friends forgive each other."

Peter leaned his head back to rest against the couch and closed his eyes tiredly. "Alright," he finally said. "I'll let it go. I suppose if Moony is willing to forgive him, it would be churlish of me not to as well."

James grinned and clasped Peter on the shoulder. Peter did not smile. James rose then to go and tell Sirius the news that the Marauders were back together. But before he could leave the Common Room, Peter called out.

"I do have one question though – would you have forgiven me that easily?"

James turned back to him and cocked his head in confusion. "What do you mean?"



Peter rose and walked up close to the leader of their little club, staring up into the taller boy's eyes with a cool expression. "I mean – If I had played a stupid petty trick on someone I didn't like with the possible result of seeing them either bitten by a werewolf or killed outright and the equally possible result of Walden McNair coming to Hogwarts with a big shiny axe for cutting off Moony's head ... would you have simply forgiven me after barely two weeks?"

James's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Peter! Of ... of course I would," he said unconvincingly.

"No," Peter replied grimly. "No, I'm sorry but I don't believe you. The Marauders are all friends, but only James and Sirius are *best* friends. I've known that since we were eleven, but I never expected it to be demonstrated so graphically. I can forgive that as easily as I can forgive what your psychopathic best mate did. But don't expect me to ever forget either of them."

And with that, Peter Pettigrew turned and walked away, leaving James Potter alone. It wasn't the first step that set Pettigrew on the path to his destiny, nor was it the last step.

But it was certainly a big step.

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***Now ...***

Peter's blank face suddenly broke out into a cheerful grin. "Honestly, Prongs. I got all the *I told you so's* out of my system in 1981. If you want to thank me for anything, do it by putting an end to that miserable traitor who's after my godson."

"It will be a pleasure," James said with a smile. Peter nodded and left the office for Gringotts. He was alone in the elevator and so took the time to review the documents James had signed to make sure they were all in order. When he saw they were, he grinned again, only it was malicious instead of cheerful.

"You are so very welcome, James," he said to himself.  
"*Mischief managed* indeed."

## **Feasts (conclusion)**

### **CHAPTER 17: Feasts, Electives and Student Organizations (conclusion)**

***3 September 1993***  
***Ancient Runes***

Just before nine o'clock, Harry and Blaise sauntered into the Ancient Runes classroom, and each took a seat on either side of Hermione on the front row. Just in front of them was the teacher's desk, and on it was what looked to be a small painting on an easel covered by a cloth. The teacher herself had not yet arrived.

"How was Muggle Studies?" Harry asked amiably. "Was it worth getting up an hour earlier than we did?"

Hermione smiled. "Yes, actually. It was quite informative."

"Really?!" Blaise inquired dubiously. "What in Merlin's name could anyone teach you about being a Muggle?"

"Well, probably nothing," she answered. "But I learned a great deal about the whys and hows of the Statute of Secrecy that I didn't know before. Also, I found it quite instructive to see how all the Purebloods in my class reacted to finding out about the Muggle space program. I'm looking forward to when Professor Potter introduces the topic of nuclear weapons to them."

Harry snickered at that but then schooled his face into a more dignified expression as Professor Babbling entered through a door in the back of the classroom. He'd spent some time over the summer reading up on one of Hogwarts'

younger instructors but had never directly interacted with her before. After his shocking realization about Quirrell and Voldemort in November of 1991, he'd briefly been alarmed when Bathsheba Babbling showed up to breakfast one morning wearing a turban of her own. He quickly relaxed upon realizing that this not a ridiculous turban-like monstrosity like the strange headgear Quirrell had worn to conceal the Dark Pimple, but rather a traditional turban worn to recognize Babbling's ethnic heritage. In short, it was at once exotic and fashionable while also small enough to reassure Harry that the woman had nothing evil growing out of the back of her head.

According to what Harry had learned since, Bathsheba Babbling (*nee* Mekonnen) was of Ethiopian descent but had been raised primarily in the wizarding enclave at Timbuktu in what Muggles presently called the Republic of Mali. While Muggle Timbuktu was sparsely populated and impoverished, its magical counterpart was a thriving cosmopolitan settlement about five times the size of Diagon Alley, with a population of well over 7,000 wizards, witches, and squibs living in a bustling town hidden from Muggle eyes by powerful magic.

Although most African wizards and witches attended Ugadougou, those from North Africa often had ties to Europe and so frequently went to Beauxbatons for their magical education. The young Bathsheba Mekonnen was one of those who did, graduating with honors in 1981 before embarking on an Ancient Runes mastery. She also met her future husband, David Babbling (from a once-British family that had expatriated to France in the 17th century) at Beauxbatons, but they had been semi-separated since she accepted her Hogwarts position in 1989. Mr. Babbling had refused to move to England as he held an important position in the French Ministry of Magic, but the two

remained happily married despite (or perhaps because of) their separation for the majority of every year. The consensus among the older Slytherin boys was that Babbling was the best-looking Hogwarts professor – Harry was mildly disturbed to hear that his mother was a close second – but unfortunately she was still not good-looking enough to get students to sign up for her rigorous Ancient Runes class unless the student had a personal reason for taking it anyway.

"Good morning, students," Babbling said brightly as she removed the fashionable but less-exotic-than-a-turban "pointy witch's hat" worn today and placed it atop a marble bust of a surly-looking Samuel Johnson. "Welcome all to Year One of Ancient Runes, which I promise you will be perhaps the most demanding class you take at Hogwarts but hopefully also the most fulfilling. At least for those of you who are able to master the material instead of being defeated by it."

As she spoke, the woman moved to the front of her desk and leaned against it. "The first thing I wish you to know is that the name of this class is a misnomer. While our topic of choice will be 'Ancient Runes' for several years to come, I prefer to think of this class as more of an 'Introduction to Magical Linguistics.' The magic that you all use for spellwork – wands waved in intricate patterns while incantations are spoken aloud – only function as they do because of the runic arrays which undergird every single Charm. Because of the *meaning* that you instill in wand-waving in ways you yourself thus far do not even understand."

With that, she turned around and removed the sheet that was covering the object on her desk. It was revealed as a Muggle painting depicting a wooden smoking pipe of the

kind a tobacco enthusiast would have described as "bent billiard" set against a pale tan background. Beneath the pipe was a quotation in French: "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe.*" Babbling turned back to her class.

"So, who here speaks French?" she inquired. After a few seconds of non-response, she focused her attention on Blaise. "Mr. Zabini? You spend time in France, *oui*?"

"Oui, I mean, yes, Professor," said Blaise who seemed a bit flustered at being called on first. "The quotation translates as '*This is not a pipe.*' Although I'm not sure I understand since, well, it obviously *is* a pipe."

"Is it indeed, Mr. Zabini?" she asked with some amusement. "Class, does everyone agree that this is a pipe?"

No one spoke up, and several students looked back and forth in mild confusion. Finally, when it was clear that no one else was going to respond, Hermione somewhat reluctantly raised her hand.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"It's not a pipe," she said. "You can't actually put tobacco in it, light it, and smoke it. It's just a representation of a pipe. The artist's point is that the representation of a thing is not the same as the thing itself."

"Well said, Miss Granger! Five points to Gryffindor."

From a row or two back, Harry thought he heard someone mutter "*know-it-all*" but he couldn't identify the voice and did not wish to turn around while right in front of the teacher. Harry wasn't sure if Hermione had heard the slur, but judging by her slight frown, he suspected that was the case.

"This," Babbling continued, "is a reproduction of a work called *The Treachery of Images* by a Belgian Muggle artist called Rene Magritte. The original presently sits in an American museum. And what Miss Granger eloquently stated – a representation of a thing is not the same as the thing itself – is quite true ... *for Muggles*. Consider the Summoning Charm. It is a simple spell normally not taught before the Fifth Year but only because of the difficulties of teaching young children how to properly visualize the spell's target and also the potential safety hazards of teaching young students to summon objects from all over the place before they are old enough to appreciate the dangers of ignoring one's surroundings. The incantation is *Accio*, which translates from the Latin roughly as '*I summon*' and the wand movement is quite simple." She paused to draw a diagram of the wand movement into the air. "And yet, if a Muggle stood before us now, pointed even the finest crafted wand from Ollivander's selection, and called out *Accio Hat* for hours, he could never achieve what I can with even the sloppiest wandwork and a casually muttered "***ACCIO HAT.***"

True to her words, she cast the spell with deliberate sloppiness and was still able to summon her hat from atop Johnson's head. With an equally sloppy wave of her wand, the hat returned to its perch.

"*That*, students, is what makes the difference between a wizard or witch and a Muggle. The true heart of all our magic derives from one singular ability: *We can forge a connection between our ideas and the physical things those ideas represent.* I have told you that the word *accio* is simply Latin for *I summon*. The Summoning Charm is one of the oldest Charms still in wide use today, and it dates back to the Roman Republic. But the creators of the spell relied upon more than Latin."

With that, she turned and began writing fiery symbols into the air in front of the class, four in all. "These symbols," she said when finished "are Akkadian cuneiform, a language dating back thousands of years before Rome. And these specific symbols written in this order represent the information matrix that... well, to greatly simplify things,'*explains*' to the world why a Summoning Charm should work. And now, watch what happens with, shall we say, a change in perspective."

With that, she slashed her wand in the direction of the cuneiform symbols, and they moved around in the air until they were all in a straight line, with some runes rotating or flipping themselves as they moved. Once they were in place, the four runes that comprised the Summoning Charm were laid on top of each other. And to Harry's surprise, the image produced by the superimposed runes looked *remarkably like* the wand movements that accompanied the Accio Charm.

"You see it now, students? The wand movements that accompany this Charm were designed to invoke the ancient Akkadian runes that symbolized the spell to be cast, but in a simplified format. And so it is with all Charms designed to be cast with wands. The wand movements transmit the meaning, *the symbology*, that underlies the intended effect, a symbology further reinforced by the use of words from a completely different language spoken aloud. With *Accio*, it is a direct translation of the Latin but the word which follows *Accio* is always uttered in the speaker's native tongue. Other spells use words from other languages or even neologisms – made-up words that invoke the concepts to be made manifest. For example, there is no language in which the words *wingardium leviosa* convey any true meaning or even make coherent sense. The word *wing* is English and invokes the idea of flight,



while *arduus* and *levis* are Latin and suggest *proudly elevated* and *light of weight*, respectively. The suffix *-ium* is of Latin origin but in this instance conveys no meaning at all except to imply an object to which a verb action has been applied. In fact, the real reason the suffixes *-osa* and *-ium* were added was for arithmantic purposes, specifically to ensure that both words each had four syllables since the number four is conducive to motion-based spells."

Professor Babbling paused to take in her audience. On the front row, Potter, Zabini, Granger, Goldstein, and Li all seemed to follow her meaning so far (and in fact, Granger almost seemed slightly bored by the lecture). Further back, Greengrass and Davis followed, if a bit more hesitantly. Otherwise, it was a sea of blank stares. Babbling fought back a sigh. After all, she had years to make them understand one of the most arcane points of magical study.

"Among all magical cultures, everywhere in the world, there are four great principles that predominate the theory of magic: Arithmancy, Sympathy, Contagion, and Symbology. Arithmancy, about which Professor Vector will have much more to say, is the idea that numbers have inherent magical significance. Sympathy is the idea that two things which seem similar should be able to affect on another. Contagion is the idea that two things once connected should be able to affect one another still. Symbology is the idea that a symbol that represents something should be able to affect the thing symbolized. While all four are valid ways of approaching magic, for you students who were born and raised here in Wizarding Britain, arithmancy and symbology are most important, for it is only among cultures who rely on wands that we find the ability to easily *draw* our symbols and numbers in the air. Even among the most skilled practitioners of the Far East, it is no easy thing to use a staff

or sword to draw symbols in the air in a manner that conveys meaning well enough to work magic."

"For some of you, even your very names invoke symbology although likely in ways you do not understand. Although the practice is dying out, it has been the custom in many old wizarding families to consult with nomenographers – a type of seer who specializes in the symbology of names – prior to the birth of children to ensure that the name eventually chosen for each newborn child is symbolically important enough to help that child maximize his or her wizarding potential. In the earliest days of Wizarding Britain, many of the old Roman families who founded our society used numenography to select new surnames for themselves when they formally broke ties with Mother Rome."

She glanced over at Harry. "Potter. A surname associated with creative shaping, appropriate for a family that has produced many skilled at Transfiguration."

Then, she looked farther back. "Greengrass. A surname associated with health, vitality, and life. Combined with Daphne, a Greek nymph with beauty enough to entrance the gods." Daphne blushed slightly at the description.

"Nomenography is a nearly extinct branch of divination, mainly because it is considered ... *unfashionable* to actively try to shape the destiny of one's own children. That said, my given name is Bathsheba, and I do not think it a coincidence that I eventually married a powerful political figure named David."

She smirked at that bon mot though Anthony Goldstein was the only one to register amusement at her remark, the other students being either more poised or simply unfamiliar with the Old Testament.

"We will begin our studies with Elder Futhark because in many ways it is the most simplistic and direct of all magical languages before we move on to increasingly sophisticated and subtle languages in future years. But do not think that because I describe Elder Futhark as simple and direct, it is something to be underestimated. The primary runes of Elder Futhark hold immense power precisely because they invoke simple, primal concepts largely devoid of nuance."

She turned again and with a flick of her wand, painted a flaming sigil in the air that resembled an S but with its curves straightened into jagged lines. "Mr. Goldstein, what is this and what is its symbolic meaning?"

Anthony swallowed at being called on first, but he was a Ravenclaw and so, of course, was prepared. "It is the rune called Eiwaz, and it means 'yew,' referring in the tree," he said.

"Correct, although in the context of magical runes, its meaning extends to any wooden object. Three points to Ravenclaw." Babbling added another fiery rune next to the Eiwaz, one that resembled a jagged incomplete R. "And this one, Miss Granger?"

"Raido," Hermione said without hesitation. "In traditional Elder Futhark, it means 'ride' or 'journey.' It is commonly used in connection with transportation spells such as portkeys."

"Well stated," Babbling said with a smile. "*Another* five points to Gryffindor. And this one, Miss Greengrass?" A third rune was added that resembled like a capital M.

A few rows back, Daphne squirmed for a moment. "Um, Mannaz?" she said timidly.

"Good guess, but no," the professor replied. "This is Ehwaz, which means 'horse.'" Next, she added a rune with one that resembled a jagged lightning bolt. "And finally, this one, Mr. ... Potter?" As she turned back around to look at Harry, she stumbled on his name and stared at him with a strange expression. Harry noticed but chose to ignore it.

"I believe that one is Sowilo, which represents the Sun," he said. "When used in magic, it simply implies raw magical power and is frequently used as a power source for permanently enchanted objects."

Babbling continued to stare at his face for a moment before shaking her head as if to clear it. "Well done as well, Mr. Potter. Five points to Slytherin." She addressed the whole class. "Sowilo is a special rune. Magically speaking, it simply invokes raw, unrefined power. Thus, it is incorporated into most runic arrays that enchant objects expected to do, well, *anything* of a physical nature. It is so powerful, in fact, that it is only rarely incorporated into wand-based spellcasting. While there are a number of powerful spells that can be cast with staves which make use of Sowilo, most attempts to incorporate it into wand-based spells simply cause the wand itself to backfire or even shatter. In point of fact, there is exactly one wand-based spell which makes use of Sowilo – and *only* Sowilo – in its wand moments: The Killing Curse."

She paused as a wave of nervousness passed over the class at the mention of the Killing Curse before resuming her lecture.

"With these four runes – Eiwaz, Raido, Ehwaz, and Sowilo – we have symbolic expressions of the concepts of wood, journey, horse and power. Or to put that another way, a wooden object ridden like a steed on long journeys and powered by magic. So it should not surprise you to learn

that the earliest and simplest flying broomsticks were simply common household brooms onto which these four runes were carved. Such simple enchantments could be worked by any witch or wizard with even basic training in runic magic, though they were grossly inferior to the modern custom-built brooms produced today by professional broomstick manufacturing firms which often incorporate dozens of runic arrays into their creations to allow for features such as Cushioning Charms and the like. The *reason* brooms are our preferred mode of flying travel is *precisely because* the only thing that could make use of this particular and easy-to-inscribe runic sequence would be a wooden object that could be ridden astride like a horse."

With a flick of her wand, she dismissed the four runes. "There are thirty-six Elder Futhark runes, of which twelve have been hidden from the knowledge of Muggles because they involve strictly magical concepts and so were proscribed by the Statute of Secrecy. Throughout this term, we will focus on one per class session, reviewing all the primary and sub-textual meanings associated with each rune. Then, we will begin learning how the interact with one another before constructing simple and later more complex runic arrays."

From there, Professor Babbling outlined the course objectives for the remainder of the school year and for each subsequent year of Ancient Runes through NEWTs. She also informed the class that over the Christmas Break, each of them would be responsible for personally enchanting a non-magical broom to fly ... and would be graded on how well it *did* fly. The end of year project would see the class broken up into teams who would jointly devise a runic array of no less than seven runes (seven being the most arithmantically stable number) that would be used to

enchant a mundane object to have a magical effect. By the time class ended, a few students were already contemplating dropping the class.

Blaise Zabini was the last to leave. Before he did, he turned back to the teacher and started to speak. Before he could, however, the woman simply shook her head *no*, and then gently placed her hands just below her neck, atop where a black and silver amulet rested beneath her blouse. Blaise closed his mouth, nodded, and placed his own hand atop the identical amulet that was hidden under his shirt in brief communion. Then, he turned and left to catch up with his friends.

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## ***Potions***

Harry's first potions class of the year (double potions with Gryffindor) passed without incident ... although he assumed that the "incident" would happen afterwards. Today was the day that Jim Potter was going to apologize to Professor Snape for his long ago and ill-fated decision to insult the man and call him "Snivellus" on his very first day of First Year Potions. Harry briefly made eye contact with Jim and mouthed "*good luck*" but then quickly exited. He didn't know if the imminent exchange would somehow bridge the gap between Jim and Professor Snape or make their hostility worse than ever, but either way, he expected it to be profoundly uncomfortable for anyone watching.

Nervously, Jim made his way forward to the front of the room where Snape sat behind a desk with his head down while writing notes in preparation for his next class. After several interminable seconds, Jim coughed as respectfully as he could.

"Class is dismissed, Other Potter," Snape said icily without raising his head.

"I know that ... sir. I just ... well, I was hoping I could speak to you for a moment between classes."

The quill pen paused, and Snape slowly raised his head to glare at the boy. "Regarding what, Other Potter," he said with a sneer.

Jim suppressed the flash of anger he felt at Snape's intentionally insulting phrase "*Other Potter*," which was how he differentiated between Jim and his twin - *Sensible Potter*. He took a deep breath. "I wanted to offer you an apology, Professor Snape."

The sneer did not disappear, but Jim could tell that Snape was at least mildly surprised. "An apology? And what, dare I ask, are you apologizing for this time?"

"Well, it's nothing *new* I've done, but ... it occurred to me that ... that I never apologized to you for insulting you on our first day of class together back when I was a First Year. When I called you ... that name. It was wrong of me and completely disrespectful and ... well, I just wanted to tell you face-to-face that I'm sorry for what I said."

Snape lifted his chin haughtily. "Your apology is rather tardy, Other Potter. About two years or so, I should say. What brought this on?" His eyes narrowed. "Did your brother put you up to this? Or your mother?"

"No," Jim said quickly. "Well, no about my mum, anyway. Harry sort of indirectly put me up to it. You see, last year, when I was in the Chamber of Secrets dying from basilisk poison..." At that, Snape's eyes *did* widen in surprise. "I apologized to Harry for the way I'd treated him and asked

him to apologize to you on my behalf. But then ... well, I didn't die like I thought I would, and Harry told me I'd have to apologize myself. So ... here I am, I guess."

As the boy spoke, he became increasingly embarrassed at his rambling. Snape said nothing for several seconds. Then, in a swift motion, he cast spells to bar the door and to set up a privacy ward.

"We will speak of these things today, Potter, and then, we will not speak of them again. Let me begin by making one thing perfectly clear. I *despise* your father, and he despises me. James Potter and his band of hoodlums made my school years utterly miserable, and if he or any of them were standing there in your place offering an apology, I would *never* accept it under any circumstances. And *you*, young man, have spent most of your first two years at Hogwarts acting just as arrogantly and foolishly as your father did before you. Frankly, you epitomize everything I detest about James Potter and Gryffindor House."

The boy looked stricken at Snape's words and bowed his head in embarrassment. Snape sighed.

"Except ... *except* ..." Snape paused as if struggling to find the words. "You have your mother's eyes."

Jim's head jerk up in surprise as the older man continued.

"And I suppose it is possible, *just barely possible*, that you might also possess some fragment of her intellect and her sensibility and her capacity for decency buried deep, *deep*, beneath that appalling crust that looks like James Potter reborn. If you genuinely wish to show contrition for your insults to me, then do so by cultivating those traits. You will cease looking constantly for reasons to attack the Slytherin students and will refrain from referring to all of them



as *slimy*. You will resist the insipid Gryffindor impulse to hurl yourself into danger at every opportunity. And for Merlin's sake, you will put some effort into my class! Your mother, had she not married and sired children at an absurdly young age, would likely have completed a Potions mastery around the same time as I did and might well be sitting in this chair instead of me. It is inconceivable that her son, after two years of Potions, has not yet figured out how to properly chop ... *anything*!"

Jim blushed slightly at that last remark as Snape leaned back in his chair.

"Do that, Other Potter, and I might accept your apology. In fact, I *might* even call you something besides *Other Potter*."

"Yes sir!" Jim said excitedly. Snape growled softly and waved his hand in dismissal as he returned to his notes. The boy quickly left, but as the door closed behind him, Snape looked up, his brow furrowed as he remembered another conversation from nearly two years before.

*"It has been twenty years since you and I were sorted into different houses,"* he'd said to Lily. *"And at long last, I can finally and truthfully say ... I'm over you."*

Snape's mouth crinkled into a rueful expression as he contemplated just how "over" Lily he really was. Then, he shook his head and returned to his work.

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## ***Defense Against the Dark Arts***

Heading into the first DADA class of the year, the general feelings of the Third Year students were mixed. Gilderoy Lockhart may have turned out to be a deranged petrifying lunatic, but up until that point, he had been one of the best

DADA instructors in recent memory. It didn't hurt that, according to most of the female student body, he was the best-looking male faculty member since ... ever. His successor, Rufus Scrimgeour, on the other hand, was a distinguished former auror, but his teaching skills were unknown, and the consensus descriptor of his appearance was not so much "dreamy" as "terrifying."

"Good afternoon, students," he began in a gruff voice. "Welcome to Defense Against the Dark Arts, etcetera etcetara. I am Professor Rufus Scrimgeour, late of the Auror Department. And if you want to know any more about my personal history, ask around because I'm not inclined to waste my time on biographical frippery. Now, in accordance with the Ministry and ICW guidelines on defensive magic instruction, your Third Year is supposed to focus on recognizing and defending against Class XXX and XXXX creatures, with a brief overview of Class XXXXX creatures at the end of the Spring term. While I will be following that general outline, recent events have led me to conclude that two potential magical dangers normally reserved for higher-level classes deserve special and immediate consideration and so will be added to your curriculum. Accordingly, open your textbooks and turn to page 394."

Dutifully, the class did as instructed, and on page 394, across from the table outlining helpful ways to identify a werewolf, was a moving picture of a Dementor. A chill settled over the classroom, and both Harry and Jim swallowed as they remembered their own face-to-face confrontation with one of the creatures.

"As you are all aware unless you are hopelessly unobservant," Scrimgeour continued, "Hogwarts is currently playing host to about a hundred of these creatures. Ostensibly, they are to remain congregated in

the airspace above the Forbidden Forest, far enough away from the school to ensure that their supernatural properties do not affect the student body in general and so that no students will be at risk for their more direct powers. Still, accidents happen, as they say, and so all students will receive instruction on defending against Dementors. With that in mind, your first homework assignment will be a report – no less than 18 inches, no more than 26 – on the known characteristics and biology of the Dementor followed by at least three practical strategies for evading or defending against one. I'll give you a few pointers for free, but don't expect full marks if you just regurgitate what I'm about to say."

"Item One. While the Dementors are here, a chocolate bar will be provided at every meal for each student. For wizards and witches, chocolate serves as an emotional stimulant that instills positive emotions to counteract the aura produced by Dementors which typically causes feelings of depression and a fixation on bad memories. Please eat chocolate in moderation and, of course, always brush your teeth after every meal."

"Item Two. Training will be offered outside of class in how to perform the Patronus Charm. To be honest, I'd always thought it impossible for anyone below the NEWTs level to produce a Patronus, but my predecessor apparently proved me wrong. Mr. Longbottom, I am informed that you are the youngest person on record as having produced a corporeal Patronus. Would you be so good as to demonstrate for the class?"

Neville blushed slightly before standing up and pointing his wand at an open area to the left of the teacher's desk.

"***EXPECTO PATRONUM.***" There was a familiar flash of silvery light, and then Elby was there in all his ursine glory.

The students who had not seen the bear Patronus before were all suitably amazed (and one or two who were nearest its manifestation were also startled and frightened).

"Well done, Mr. Longbottom," said the professor. "Most impressive. Five points to Gryffindor. However, class, you will be pleased to note that as impressive as this manifestation is, a true corporeal Patronus is not necessary to repel a Dementor. The most basic manifestation of the Charm, a silvery haze sometimes referred to as a mist Patronus, will generally ward off one or two, through the corporeal Patronus is required to fend off more than that or to repel even a single Dementor that is, for some reason, particularly aggressive."

At that, Harry crooked an eyebrow, though he did not raise his hand to inquire further. Back on the train, he'd faced off against a Dementor which indeed particularly aggressive and was hardly slowed down at all by his mist Patronus, even though he'd cast it more than once.

"We will begin offering classes this coming Sunday afternoon and every Sunday thereafter for the benefit of students who wish to attempt to learn the Patronus Charm. These classes are optional for Fourth Years and below but are mandatory for Fifth Years and up."

Then, Scrimgeour paused dramatically. "And with that out of the way, let us turn to the second magical danger I wish to discuss that are not normally a part of the Third Year curriculum: dark wizards. And more specifically, Death Eaters."

Most of the class shifted uneasily at the mention of Death Eaters. Everyone knew that five of Voldemort's inner circle

had escaped Azkaban, but was Professor Scrimgeour really planning on teaching Third Years to *fight* dark wizards?

"Normally, the material I am about to discuss would be more appropriate for History of Magic, but since it does not consist of tedious trivia about goblin uprisings from the 15th century, I doubt Professor Binns will ever touch on it. So let us begin with a seemingly simple question: What is a Death Eater? Some might limit the term to those who took the Dark Mark and swore allegiance to You-Know-Who, but that number is actually quite small, no more than a few dozen at most, many of whom successfully proved before a court of law that they had been magically coerced into taking the Mark. Beyond marked Death Eaters, there were hundreds if not thousands of unmarked wizards and witches who served You-Know-Who in some capacity. Some were enthusiastic thugs and terrorists who derived sick pleasure from attacking Muggles and Muggleborn, as well as other wizards and witches who simply attracted their ire. Others ideologically agreed with Death Eater philosophy but lacked the courage of their convictions enough to take up arms in support of it, although they were happy to provide other forms of support. Still others wanted nothing to do with Death Eater philosophy but were bribed or blackmailed or brainwashed or Imperiused into serving anyway. Indeed, when You-Know-Who was destroyed on Halloween of 1981, no body was found. We only know of his destruction due to the fact that people who he had personally placed under the Imperius were instantly freed from his control, along with those that *they* had placed under the Imperius at his command and all those others that *their* victims had put under the curse as well. A cascade failure of Imperius control of a sort that only happens with the death of the original wizard who cast the curse, as its effects cannot survive post mortem."

Harry shivered at the professor's description of the Imperius Curse, even though he knew full well of its insidious potential ever since Regulus had used it on the real Gilderoy Lockhart to force him to self-administer the Tabula Rasa spell. On some level, Harry thought he was supposed to be deeply offended by Reg's use of an Unforgivable, but he had managed successfully not to think about it until Scrimgeour raised the topic just now. Meanwhile, Jim swallowed nervously. After all these years of being told that he'd been the one to destroy Voldemort, it had never occurred to him that no body had been recovered even though word of his death had seemed to spread almost instantly in its aftermath.

"We will spend part of each class this term reviewing the history of the Death Eater movement, from its origins as a counter-reaction to the Muggleborn civil rights movement in the 1950's and 60's to its embrace of anti-Muggle terrorism in the 1970's on to its eventual collapse after the destruction of You-Know-Who in 1981. To facilitate discussion, each student will be assigned a research topic on some facet of the Death Eater movement, whether pertaining to its history, some of its more infamous crimes, or some of its most influential members. These reports will be turned in to me before you leave for Christmas Break and will later be presented orally to the class at some point in the Spring Term. If anyone has any particular interests, please see me outside of class, and if I judge it relevant and broad enough, I may permit you to pursue it as a special project. Otherwise, all project topics will be assigned by me."

"And now that the interesting portion of today's class is complete, we shall proceed to the far less engaging topic of how to drive away an attacking grindylow by violently

snapping its fingers off. Kindly turn back in your textbook to page 4."

There was a rustle of pages as the class complied. Harry found it difficult to concentrate on Scrimgeour's lecture, however, and eventually, he went through an Occlumency exercise to partition in brain into two separate thought tracks, one to listen to the lecture without distraction and take proper notes and the other to ruminate on what Scrimgeour had said about the Death Eaters and the proposed research assignments. Later, after the lesson had ended, Harry waited behind to speak with the man.

"Yes, Mr. Potter?" the man said amiably while shuffling some papers.

"You said, sir, that we could pick our own research topics about the Death Eaters. I, er, had one in mind, but I think I might need some help in getting the materials to write a paper on it."

"Oh? What is your proposed topic?"

"The trial of Sirius Black," Harry said without preamble.

The DADA professor turned to study Harry, and while the boy was confident that he was not being actively legilimized, he still had the uncomfortable sensation of being scrutinized by a powerful and observant intellect that had spent decades ferreting out hidden truths. It was intimidating, bordering on unnerving. After a few seconds of such consideration, Scrimgeour spoke again.

"A provocative topic indeed. And what research materials do you think you require? I seem to recall the Daily Prophet covering that trial quite thoroughly."

"Only in summary form, Professor. I thought it would be better to go back to the original source material, so I was hoping you might be able to help me obtain an actual copy of the trial transcript."

The man nodded. "And why me, exactly?"

Harry swallowed despite himself. "Well, sir, you are the former Chief Auror. I thought you might have some contacts that could make it easier to get a copy of the transcript."

"I might," he said drily. "I find it curious, however, that you would approach me about this instead of going to your father, the *current* Chief Auror. Might I assume that for some reason you don't want James Potter to know about your research?"

*"And just like that, he cuts to it,"* Harry thought ruefully. *"I really shouldn't plan on getting away with anything sneaky where this guy's concerned."* But while obfuscation seemed out of the question, Harry thought of a misdirection that might work.

"My father chose not to testify personally in the Sirius Black case even though he was the arresting auror. He and my mother just contributed magical affidavits. He didn't even attend the trial even though Black had supposedly been his best friend for a decade or more and yet had betrayed him to You-Know-Who. From what he's told me, he never even inquired as to why Sirius Black betrayed him. I thought that was ... odd."

Scrimgeour studied the boy for several seconds more before responding. "Yes. Decidedly so. Very well, Mr. Potter. Consider me ... intrigued. I'll make arrangements for you to get a certified copy of the Black trial transcript."



"Thank you sir," Harry said before turning to leave the room. Halfway to the door, though, Scrimgeour spoke again.

"I do hope the results of your research are fruitful, Mr. Potter and justify whatever effort I expend on your behalf."

*"Translation: I'm gonna owe him for this,"* Harry thought to himself while keeping his face a mask of serenity. "I certainly hope so as well, Professor Scrimgeour. I'll be very grateful for any assistance you can give me."

Scrimgeour nodded and returned to his class notes as the next batch of students began filtering in. First Years, it looked like. Harry made his way outside, and once in the hall, he exhaled deeply. He wasn't actually sure whether his research would bear any fruit at all, but a chance to read the elusive Black transcript couldn't be ignored. He headed off to his next class.

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### ***Introductory Meeting for an Unnamed Club***

Harry's final class of the day was Arithmancy which passed uneventfully. It was taught by a strict but seemingly fair teacher named Septima Vector who warned of massive amounts of homework. The focus of the class was on the magical significance of numbers. For example, while the words incorporated into a spell were selected according to their symbolic significance (as Professor Babbling had discussed), the principles of Arithmancy determined things like how many syllables an incantation would need to best achieve the Charm's intended purpose. The class promised to be both rigorous and, unfortunately, rather boring, at least in Harry's initial estimation. For starters, the syllabus indicated that the first *two months* of Arithmancy classes

would be devoted exclusively to the occult significance of the number seven. Harry noted that Vector's first name – Septima – was actually derived from the Latin word for seven, and he considered asking her if her parents had consulted a nomenographer before deciding it would be rude.

Dinner came after Arithmancy, followed by the organizational meeting for Hermione's as-yet-unnamed club. Third Years in attendance included Harry, Blaise, and Theo from Slytherin House; Hermione, Luna, Jim, and Ron from Gryffindor; Anthony and Sue Li from Ravenclaw; and Susan Bones, Justin, and Kevin Entwhistle from Hufflepuff. There was a smattering of students from other years (Penelope Clearwater and Colin Creevey, among a few others), but mainly it was kids from Hermione's peer group. Conspicuous by their absences (given their well-known friendship with both Harry and Hermione) were Neville Longbottom, Ginny Weasley, and Amy Wilkes. In fact, out of nearly twenty students in attendance, Luna, Ron, and Susan were the only Purebloods, though several Half-bloods like Jim had been raised almost entirely in wizarding society.

Hermione had chosen the History of Magic classroom for the group's first meeting. Everyone else took a seat facing the teacher's desk while Hermione repositioned a chair in front of it to face the club. Harry smiled. Apparently the thought of simply sitting behind the desk in Binn's official "teacher's chair" was unthinkable for her. As the group settled in, he noticed the girl looking in his direction. He, Blaise, Theo, Jim, and Ron were all grouped together, and for a few seconds, Hermione seemed to study them all with an odd expression. Then, she blinked her eyes repeatedly and shook her head. Taking a deep breath, the obviously nervous girl began.

"Thank you all for coming. I've talked to most of you briefly about this, but just so we all understand what this group is about ... Over the course of the last few months, we've all had to face some disturbing truths. Let me start by saying ... I love magic. I am proud to be a witch and to be a member of a magical society. *However*, to be honest, I also find that I am uncomfortable with some aspects of wizarding culture. And in particular, I am very uncomfortable with the idea that under some circumstances the government of our magical society can pass laws that will essentially inflict *mind control* on citizens and even on children. But what I find most troubling about this is that ... no one seems to care. And worse, a lot of our fellow students seem to think that because some of us were raised in Muggle society, we simply '*don't understand*' why things like this *Ultimate Sanction* are acceptable, and so we should just be quiet and accept how things are." She paused to catch her breath. "Well, I'm sorry, but I just can't accept that someone I consider a friend is going to be treated horribly because of a *spell* that everyone just happily accepts as part of magical society. I guess that's just the '*big mouth know-it-all*' in me, but that's the way I feel."

Theo grimaced slightly at being made the center of attention. Even though Hermione never mentioned his name specifically, everyone at the school knew his situation, and while he was grateful for support, he had no interest in being either an object of pity or a mascot for some Muggleborn rights group.

Further back, Sue Li spoke up. "I agree with all that in principle, Granger, but ... what do you want us to do about it? I mean, as far as I know, none of us can do anything to counteract the Ultimate Sanction's effects. It would take the whole Wizengamot to overturn the magical law that makes it work. So what really is the point of this group?"

"Well, my hope is that this club can be a way for the Muggleborn, the Muggle-raised and ... the Friends of Muggleborns, I guess ... to come together and support one another. We can also work together to research issues like the Ultimate Sanction and see if anything can be done about them before anyone else gets hurt by them. And also, I would hope that through this club we could both learn more about Pureblood society and customs while also helping Pureblooded wizards and witches to understand the Muggle-raised mindset a bit better. I think the best way to counteract bigotry on both sides is work for mutual understanding."

Some of the students nodded in agreement, but others seemed more doubtful. Anthony Goldstein raised his hand. "I don't have a problem with any of that, but I would also like for the club to address other elements of the Muggle-Wizarding divide. Before you suggested this group, Hermione, I was going to ask you to join some of us in researching ways to allow Muggle technology to work in high-magic areas. Or failing that, to research how to create magical items that would more properly mimic Muggle technology. I heard you and Harry dabbled in that back in First Year but chose not to continue."

"That would be because we got a week of particularly nasty detentions for blowing out all the windows in a Second Floor classroom," Harry said drily. "Along with my eardrums. On the bright side, at least I got a fairly obscure, sonic-based attack Charm out of it."

"Oooh! Share!" said Jim, who was always on the lookout for new combat Charms. Harry laughed and said "*later*."

"Certainly, we can use the club as a springboard for research into things like that," Hermione said. "So long as it

doesn't get in the way of our main goals."

"By the way," asked Kevin. "What's the club's name?"

"Well," Hermione began hesitantly, "that's probably our first official item of business..."

"Personally," interrupted Blaise with a smirk, "I still think '*Society for the Prevention of Abusive Magic*' is a fine name."

"No. It's. Not." Hermione said curtly.

"I kind of like that," Penelope Clearwater said. "What's the problem with that name, Hermione?"

"She thinks the acronym is undignified," Harry said with a chuckle.

"What ... S.P.A.M.?" asked Susan Bones to which several Muggle-raised students sniggered in response.

"We are *not* calling it S.P.A.M.!" Hermione said more forcefully.

"Well why not?" asked Justin Finch-Fletchley. "I mean, this club is, as you said, for Muggleborn, Muggle-raised, and Friends of Muggles – nice phrasing that, by the way. PC but not obnoxiously so."

"Yeah," added Anthony. "And what could be more Mugglish than *Spam*!"

Hermione started to respond but then paused and looked at Goldstein in confusion. "Anthony, aren't you Jewish?"

The Ravenclaw straightened up in his chair and raised his chin haughtily. "Just because I would never

actually *eat* Spam does not mean that I am unaware of its cultural significance."

By this point, the Purebloods in the room seemed hopelessly confused, and Ron leaned over towards Harry. "What is Spam, anyway?"

Harry answered with authority. "Spam is a canned pork-based meat product sold in Muggle grocery stores. Depending on who you ask, it is either a Muggle delicacy or the nastiest food stuff ever invented."

"And as an added bonus," Blaise continued mischievously, "if we go with S.P.A.M., we've already got a ready-made club song!"

"Blaise, *don't!*" Hermione said plaintively. But it was too late, as Zabini suddenly burst into song.

"SPAM, *spam*, spam, Spam! SPAM, *spam*, spam, Spam!"

He was soon joined by Anthony, Kevin, and Justin, who all knew the song in question and merrily joined in with three-part harmony.

"Lovely Spaaaaam! Wonderful Spaaam! Lovely Spaaaaam! Wonderful Spaaam!"

At that, Ron, Jim, and Theo all turned expectantly towards Harry. Unfortunately, the young Slytherin had never been exposed to *Monty Python's Flying Circus* while living with the Dursleys and so was at a loss himself. He gave a shrug. "Sorry. I got nothing."

In the front of the room, Hermione Granger covered her face with her hands as if trying to block out a recurring nightmare.

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## ***Introductory Meeting for a Different Club***

Meanwhile, a much better attended, furnished, and catered meeting for the Hogwarts Cultural Preservation Society was taking place at the same time. It was held in a very spacious and comfortable room on the Sixth Floor that many years before had been the meeting space for a long defunct social group called the Slug Club. There were over forty students in attendance, and the club's organizers had arranged for punch and light appetizers provided by Hogwarts house elves. The first half-hour had been given over to socializing which nearly led to an unpleasant exchange near the punch bowl.

"Ginevra?!" exclaimed Drusilla Crabbe at the sight of her year-mate, Ginny Weasley of the notorious '*blood traitor Weasleys*.' "What brings you here? I mean, isn't your family ... um?"

Ginny favored Drusilla with an expression that was bland bordering on haughty. "Isn't my family *what*, Drusilla? A member of the Sacred 28? Why yes indeed we are!"

Drusilla swallowed tightly at the reminder that, for all her family's Pureblood pretensions, the Crabbes could never demonstrate a purity of ancestry even close to the Weasleys, despite their current reduced circumstances. She gave a tight smile and beat a hasty retreat. As she left, Amy Wilkes came up beside Ginny to refill her own punch glass.

"I think you enjoyed that," she said.

Ginny shrugged. "A little," she said under her breath. "But it's not really any fun to beat Crabbe at a game I don't care about."

Amy nodded. "So what's the game plan?"

"Blend in. Look and act bigoted but not obnoxiously so. Say mean things about Theo every now and then. Be attentive without it being obvious that we're taking notes for Harry."

Amy took a sip of punch without responding, and the two girls went in search of a place to sit, not noticing how, across the room, the Carrow Twins studied them with intense unblinking eyes. The room was crowded despite its size, and after about half an hour, its organizers started moving chairs about and transfiguring benches for people to sit on. To Ginny's surprise, only about a third of those in attendance were Slytherins. The Cultural Preservation Society obviously had Pureblood Slytherin fingerprints all over it, but the upper-year Slytherins were canny enough to hold back and let Purebloods from other houses take the lead and be the public face of the new organization. In fact, there were no Slytherins among the club's officers. Officially, Cedric Diggory, Cho Chang, and Oliver Wood were in charge, though Amy had quickly intuited that the Greengrass sisters, Cassius Warrington, and some of their older peers were probably running things.

Once everyone was seated, Cedric stepped forward to give an introductory speech. "Welcome all to the inaugural meeting of the Hogwarts Cultural Preservation Society. I thank you all for coming to what I hope is the first of many enjoyable evenings to come. I want to stress that while this is at the moment a Pureblood organization, we will not in any way discriminate against any non-Purebloods who want to join us should there be any in the future. In fact, we encourage you to invite Halfbloods and even Muggleborns so that they understand what we're all about and don't get the wrong idea. Our society is not based on the idea that Purebloods are better than other wizards and witches. But



by the same token, neither are we any less than them. We are simply a society with its own rich customs and history, and we deserve to have those customs and history respected just as much as anyone raised among Muggles."

"Hear, hear!" exclaimed Cormac McLaggen, and a few others clapped politely.

Diggory nodded to Cho, who continued the opening speech. "To that end, our plan is to meet regularly so that we can interact with fellow Purebloods who share a common heritage and also so that we can teach one another our family histories and traditions. Many of us have family members who work for the Ministry or even hold seats in the Wizengamot. Yet very rarely are we taught about what the Ministry and the Wizengamot do outside of the individual interests of our families. Think of the CPS as a chance to network with like-minded wizards and witches who will one day aid you in forming the backbone of our society. After all, it is only by understanding our own social heritage that we can help others to understand that heritage instead of wanting to tear it down."

Neville Longbottom frowned at that. "Is that something you think we should be worried about? Muggleborns tearing down our heritage?"

The question caught Cho and Cedric off-guard. "It's not that we're ... *worried* per se," Cedric said. "But at the same time, we need to be aware of how past conflicts between Purebloods and Muggleborn had played out and escalated into public violence. I don't think anyone here is a future Death Eater – I hope not, anyway – but one thing I've learned lately is that You-Know-Who might never have risen to power if there hadn't been a lot of Pureblooded wizards

who were terrified of the changes Muggleborn activists of the 50's and 60's had wanted to make."

"Like what?" Ginny asked doubtfully.

To her surprise, Daphne Greengrass spoke up from behind her. "Like a Marriage law, for starters." Everyone turned to look at the young Slytherin.

"A Marriage Law?" Ginny asked in confusion.

"After Professor Lockhart gave us that lecture about werewolves and Dark Lords in which he mentioned Alexander McAvity, I decided to look him up. There were a lot of outrageous ideas put forth by his movement, and some of his supporters were even more radical than McAvity himself. Some of his most extreme supporters essentially called for the eventual abolition of Purebloods as a concept. To bring that about, they wanted a law to make it illegal for a wizard and witch to marry if they had more than four wizarding grandparents between the two of them. In your case, Weasley, all four of your grandparents were magical, so it would be illegal for you to marry anyone who wasn't either a Muggle or a third-generation squib. And if you couldn't find a suitable match on your own, the Ministry - under Muggleborn guidance - would choose a mate for you."

Ginny and Amy both looked aghast at Daphne.

"That law never got anywhere near passage," Cedric continued. "But they came very close to forcing the passage of other laws and regulations, especially after they got a Muggleborn named Nobby Leach elected Minister. Laws to inflate the OWL and NEWT scores of Muggleborns so that they could get Ministry jobs they hadn't actually earned. Laws to establish quotas for how many Muggleborns would

be *guaranteed* Ministry jobs, along with relaxed entry standards for the Auror Corps or St. Mungo's for Muggleborns who otherwise couldn't pass the entry exams. Laws to force family businesses that had been in operation for generations to go under unless they gave jobs and even a stake in the business to Muggleborn applicants."

"And consider this, Longbottom," Zacharias Smith added pompously. "Your family is Ancient and Noble. It has been in Britain since the 5th century and has held a voice in the Wizengamot since it was founded. But if the Dark Lord McAvity had gotten his way, you would *not* be guaranteed the Longbottom Seat when you come of age. Instead, if you wanted it, you would have to win an *election* for it. Every Wizengamot member would have to stand for election, just like the Minister does." He snorted in amazement. "Think about that! They wanted to tear down a system of government that has endured for over a thousand years simply because due to an accident of breeding, they weren't born at the top, and so they wanted to drag down the ones who were. I mean, Wizarding Britain *exists* because of the Vows of Unity that bind the Wizengamot together. Who even *knows* what would happen if those vows were broken without good reason?"

Amy Wilkes spoke up. "That's all well and good, but what I want to know is: What does all this have to do with Theo No-Name?" There was a flurry of tension and perhaps anger that swirled through the room at the mention of Theo's name. Except for Ginny and Amy (who due to a peculiar quirk of her family status was not presently bound by any oaths to the Wizengamot), every single person in the room was under the effects of the Sanction.

"I mean," she continued, "that *is* what led Purebloods from all four Houses to decide to start this club, right? Honestly, I

see a lot of people in this room who wouldn't have given each other the time of day just a few months ago."

Cedric looked away while he worked to bring his emotions under control. He honestly wanted this group to be about more than Theo No-Name, but he couldn't deny that the outcast's presence at Hogwarts was a triggering event.

"Fair enough," he finally said. "You're right. The presence of the outcast at the school was what brought us all together. But another part of it was the incident the other day at Platform 9 3/4. And particularly, what young Goldstein said to us all. I did some research on that ... *Dachau* place he mentioned. It was ... horrible. But it was also *irrelevant* to the outcast's situation. I know the Muggleborns and Muggle-raised think what happened to Theo No-Name is unfair, and perhaps it is. But ... the law that made him outcast is the law of the Wizengamot. It is the law that binds our nation together and makes all of us a part of it." He paused and took a deep breath. "I don't know if I can explain it in terms that someone unaffected can understand, Wilkes, but ... my magic tells me that Theo No-Name is an enemy and is unclean and should not be a part of our world. Now, I certainly don't plan to start anything with him and I hope none of you will as well. If nothing else, the faculty have made it clear that they won't stand for it. But I can't deny what my magic tells me anymore than what my eyes and ears do. It's too much a part of who I am to ignore."

At that, most of the assembled students actually burst into applause in response to Cedric Diggory articulating what they all felt but could not put into words. Ginny and Amy glanced at each other nervously before joining in the applause with as much enthusiasm as they could fake.

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### ***Meanwhile, back at S.P.A.M.***

After an hour of discussing an agenda for the group, the inaugural meeting of S.P.A.M. finally broke up. Immediately, Hermione moved to speak with Theo, but an excited Anthony Goldstein reached her first.

"So I know it's just our first meeting," he said, "and we've got a lot of potential avenues for research. But since you've obviously actually thought about this more than I have, do you have any ideas for research avenues on why magic and technology don't mix?"

Although she heard Anthony's question, her attention was focused on Theo No-Name who had swiftly made his way out of the room without speaking to anyone else. "Plastic and electricity," she said distractedly.

"What?" Anthony said in surprise.

"What?" Hermione answered back as if fully noticing the boy for the first time. Meanwhile, Harry and Jim moved closer to listen in on the conversation.

"Plastics and electricity?" Anthony repeated. "What do you base that on? Have you found any research on this topic?"

Hermione stammered for a bit before answering. "Oh, yes. I read that in a book ... somewhere. I'll have to look it up and get you the citation. But, um, yes - high levels of magic cause the structure of some kinds of plastic to degrade and also cause electrical currents to ... go all funny, making electrically-powered items likely to overload."

"The plastic issue is easily overcome," said Sue Li as she approached. "Muggles only use plastic for their devices because modern manufacturing techniques make it

cheaper and easier to shape plastic into the form you need than natural materials. But with Transfiguration, there's no reason you couldn't shape the casing of, say, a TV or a stereo out of wood or metal."

"Hmm." Anthony seemed lost in thought for a moment. "But it's a much bigger problem if the mere presence of magic changes the properties of electricity. Is there any way to insulate something from magic?"

No one said anything at first, but then, Harry gave an exclamation. "Yes! Orichalcum! It's some ... stuff you can make with alchemy that's magic resistant." He turned to Jim. "The killer trains from last year's birthday party were made with orichalcum. It's what let them slice through a Protego like it wasn't even there." Jim shuddered at the recollection of his and Harry's disastrous 12th birthday party.

"Well, then," Hermione said. "I guess you've got your research avenues, Anthony. Let me know how it goes."

Soon, everyone had left the meeting room, and Hermione headed off towards Gryffindor Tower. She hadn't gotten very far when she heard Harry calling after her. She stopped and waited for him to catch up.

"So," he began with a bit of a smirk. "Now that everyone's gone ... how did you *really* learn that magic negatively affects plastic and electricity?"

"I told you back at the meeting," Hermione began.

"Aw, pull the other one, Hermione. We both know you have a photographic memory. There's no way that you could ever have read something as interesting as 'magic reacts badly with plastic and electricity' and not remembered what book

it was in. I reckon you found it while perusing something you shouldn't have but you didn't want to say in front of the others."

Hermione looked away for a moment in embarrassment. "Alright, Harry. You've caught me. Last year, I managed to trick Professor Lockhart into giving me a pass to the Restricted Session. I was curious as to what sort of books were in there, and I found a book of research about magic and Muggle technology that the Ministry had suppressed. But I didn't want to explain where I found it, and given the sensitive nature of the research, I don't think Anthony or anyone else will be able to check it out. Satisfied?"

Harry studied his first friend for a second or two. "Sure. Thanks for being honest with me." Then, he looked around the corridor. "Can you make it back to the Tower by yourself?"

She gave him a *look* that reminded him she was a Gryffindor from the House Without Fear. He nodded, made his goodbyes and headed back to the Slytherin dungeon.

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Later, Theo was alone in his room laying on his bed and staring intently at the ceiling when there was a soft click as Blaise entered through the secret passage. Theo snorted.

"I know we need to travel secretly because you and Harry dare not be seen with *the outcast*, but does that mean I'm not entitled to any privacy at all?"

Blaise put his hands up in a placating manner. "Sorry, sorry. I just wanted to see how you were. I get the strong impression that you weren't happy with S.P.A.M. and its agenda. Especially its agenda regarding you."

Theo shrugged. "Well, I *guess* I'm happy that there are people who want to look after me. But ... most of them don't understand what it's going to be like. And I don't want anyone to get hurt because of me."

"Spare me the martyr act, Theo. It's not appealing. What's really got you upset?"

The other boy glared at Blaise. "Okay. If you must know, I think things are bad enough for me without being someone's *project*. Even if it's Hermione Granger. I was afraid after last year that she was going to take up house elf rights or something silly like that. I never imagined that it would be *me* that she would take up as her Noble Cause. And frankly, I don't appreciate it."

Blaise chuckled. "You knew she was a Gryffindor when you befriended her, as did I. And neither of us will ever stop her from being ... her. Best to just hang on as best you can and divert her from her more Gryffindorish impulses."

Theo closed his eyes. "Yeah. Like that's going to happen."

---

Later, after checking in with Blaise and Theo and then collecting a "report" from Ginny and Amy, Harry entered his own room and prepared for bed. He'd been troubled since the S.P.A.M. meeting ended but he wasn't sure why. Finally, he opened up the drawer on the side table next to his bed and removed his enchanted mirror.

"Regulus Black," he said after tapping the mirror to activate it. A few seconds later, Regulus's face popped into view.

"Harry? What is it? You already talked to Sirius and me earlier today. Has something happened?"



"No, no. I ... just had a quick question for you. Last year, when you were Gilderoy Lockhart ... at any point did Hermione Granger persuade you to give her a pass to the Restricted Section?"

Regulus blinked a few times. "No, not that I recall. Why?"

"I don't know," Harry said thoughtfully. "It's just ... something odd. It's probably nothing." Harry and Regulus spoke for a few more minutes before signing off. But as Harry drifted off to sleep, his eerie and intuitive Legilimency instincts left him certain of one thing. It was not *nothing*.

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### ***Introductory Meeting for a Very Different Club*** **Just before Midnight** **Knockturn Alley**

The Boar's Tusk was perhaps the least reputable of the many disreputable bars and dives in Knockturn Alley. In fact, "disreputable" was an understatement – until political realities forced its name change in the 1940's, the bar was once called The Hanging Muggle. The place was packed tonight though because word had been sent out across Knockturn Alley. There was work to be done. Good paying work. Or at least there was for those who were willing to do what they were told and not really care about who got hurt along the way. None of the people in the front of the bar was carrying a Dark Mark, but there were *a lot* who eagerly would have if they'd impressed Lord Voldemort enough for him to offer it back in the day.

Peter Pettigrew sat alone in a backroom puttering around with some glass vials he'd brought along. With professional care, he opened up one vial and withdrew from it a single

black hair with a set of tweezers. Then, he opened the second vial containing a sludgy mudlike potion and dropped the hair into it. Instantly, the potion turned to a cerulean blue and gave off the aroma of an expensive cologne mixed with a faint dash of motor oil. As the potion completed its alteration, the door opened, and Fenrir Greyback entered the room.

"Good crowd," he said. "About fifty in all. If we get enough recruits tonight, we won't even need to do this again."

"Good," Peter said ruefully. "Because I've only got three hairs left."

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Moments later, Greyback returned to the main bar and yelled for everyone's attention.

"What's this about, werewolf?" yelled a drunken Aries Flint. "What are you hiring for?"

Greyback sneered. "Not me, Flint. My boss."

There was a brief murmur of surprise from many of those present. There was only one person that Fenrir Greyback ever referred to as his "boss" – Lord Voldemort. It was not Lord Voldemort, however, that stepped into the room, though it was someone who generated nearly as much fear. His hair was as black as night, and his eyes as grey as death. And miraculously, he actually seemed *younger and healthier* tonight than when he went into Azkaban, though no one could have imagined what dark magic caused his rejuvenation.

"Some of you know me by reputation," Peter Pettigrew said in another man's voice from behind another man's stolen face. "But I'll introduce myself anyway. I am Sirius Black,

the Dark Lord's Right Hand. And on his behalf, I've got a job for you." And through the miracle of Polyjuice, Peter Pettigrew grinned with another man's teeth.

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## **Hogwarts**

### **The private chambers of Bathsheba Babbling**

**12:45 a.m.**

The first day of the new term had been surprisingly stressful for Professor Babbling, and the worst part was that she didn't even know why. At the fifth degree of mastery (though she worked hard to conceal her skill from her co-workers), Babbling was probably the third-most skilled Occlumens at Hogwarts behind the Headmaster and Professor Snape. In some ways, she thought she was even ahead of Snape, who seemed to focus excessively on the defensive aspects of the art at the expense of its more subtle uses. Case in point: It was the practice of Bathsheba Babbling to keep her mind bifurcated at all times, so that even as she delivered her lectures, a part of her was intently studying those around her in pursuit of information and insight. Most of the time – indeed, nearly all of the time – that secondary thought process ran quietly and unobtrusively. Today, it did not. For a brief instant, just a few seconds into the Third Year Ancient Runes class, her subconscious *shouted* about something it had observed loudly enough to disrupt her conscious thought processes and lose her public composure for a few seconds. Nothing like it had ever happened before. And the worst part? After that brief but alarming shout, her second mind receded back into her subconscious without further incident. And since reviewing the mental record of that second mind usually required an hour at least of uninterrupted meditation and thought, she'd spent the entire day aware that there was some vital bit of information that she *could*

*not review.* The nature of her understanding prevented her from understanding what she had already understood.

Finally, at the end of a long day (she'd spent several hours after supper meeting with NEWT-level students to go over their individualized research projects) Babbling sat down at the desk in her private rooms to begin the process of unknotting the tangle of interwoven thoughts that were both the sword and shield of an Occlumens of her level. As part of her nightly ritual, she began by brewing a stout cup of mint tea and letting the aroma lure her into a relaxed state. She took a sip and then sat at her writing desk, placing the saucer and cup off to the side. The desk itself sat in front of a large window with a beautiful view of Black Lake and the gibbous moon above it. Bathsheba relaxed for a few moments to take in the view. Then, she picked up a self-inking quill and allowed her second mind to control her hand, using it to draw across a fresh parchment in swirling patterns as she thought about the day's events.

Surprisingly quickly, she found the source of the disturbance. It was something about the very beginning of class. Something to do with ... Harry Potter. Her hand jerked slightly, and for an instant, the swirling pattern of her hand motion was replaced with a sharp movement as she sketched out the *Wunjo* rune, which meant "joy" or "excitement." Her hand resumed its lazy swirling patter as she thought back on her memories of the boy. He'd done good work in class and seemed prepared for the material. She studied her memories of his face. Perfectly coiffed hair that suggested vanity, or perhaps just a burning desire to differentiate himself from his family. (*Everyone on the faculty knew about his relations with the Potters.*) Brilliant green eyes that flashed with remarkable intelligence. (*And was he a practicing Occlumens? And Legilimens too? She should find a chance to discreetly talk to Blaise about that.*)

Very expensive and heavily charmed glasses. (*A cunning mind that sought to prepare for all eventualities? Or just one in the grip of paranoia? Why not both?*) And on the side of his head, a jagged scar in the same general location as his more famous sibling's notorious "V" scar. (*Caused by falling masonry or something like that during You-Know-Who's attack on Jim Potter, or so she seemed to recall. Odd that it should look so much like a lightning bolt.*)

Suddenly, her hand jerked sharply, almost painfully, and Babbling looked down to see that her second mind had drawn a large depiction of the Sowilo run that had taken up half the page.

"*Strange,*" she thought to herself. "*I wonder what brought that on.*" She closed her eyes and reviewed her memories once more but more slowly. And as she focused her attention on Harry's scar once more, her hand jerked a second time. She did not even need to open her eyes and look to know that once again, her second mind had drawn the Sowilo. "*Something about Potter's scar and the Sowilo. Something ...*"

She gasped and her eyes opened wide as the insight gripped her. "*Harry Potter's scar looks like the Sowilo rune! No, what are you saying, Bathsheba. It doesn't just look like the Sowilo rune! It's a perfect representation of Sowilo. Almost as if someone had deliberately ...!*"

At that, Babbling's attention was suddenly diverted by a soft clattering sound. She looked down and, to her surprise, saw that her tea cup was shaking. Within seconds, however, the intensity of the vibrations grew to the point that mint tea sloshed out of the cup and onto the saucer, which was itself vibrating to the point that it had started to move slowly across the desk. The rattling of the cup and saucer was

soon joined by a violent rattling from the window in front of the witch. And that sound as well was joined by yet another – a strange discordant hum that came from everywhere and nowhere and slowly increased in volume, as if it were the herald of a terrible *something*.

Babbling looked around the room in rising panic. Then, she quickly drew a deep centering breath and closed her eyes once more. A look of serenity fell upon her face. It was a lie. Deep beneath the apparent calm of her first mind, her second mind was frantic and terrified as it desperately erased memories, threw up psychic shields, rewove mental pathways, and instilled subconscious commands that the first mind would not understand even as it carried them out. As this internal work was accomplished, Babbling's calm external visage assumed a dreamlike quality before she smiled, as if amused by her own foolishness.

"Honestly, Bathsheba," she said aloud. "You're being ridiculous. That scar looks nothing like a Sowilo or any other rune." As the witch spoke to herself, the rattling and humming slowly diminished even as she unconsciously pulled forth a clean sheet of parchment and began to write upon it.

"You're just tired and seeing things," she said amiably as all thoughts of the scar's true significance were systematically purged from her conscious mind. "It's just a scar. Probably caused by falling masonry or something like that. Nothing unusual about it at all."

While she spoke, her hands worked on their own, folding the message she had written into an envelope which she quickly sealed and addressed. Then, she rested her hands on the desk, and after a few seconds, her eyes fluttered open. She appeared relaxed, all of her former anxiety about

the day washed away by her meditations. Glancing down at the table, she noticed a letter that she must have written earlier but forgotten to mail. She looked over at the clock on the wall. It was not yet one o'clock. Late, but not too late to send a letter to one of her dearest friends (and the person who had helped her get her Hogwarts position four years earlier) relating how her son had performed on his first day of class.

*"That was what I put in the letter, wasn't it?"* Bathsheba thought to herself for a moment before shrugging the matter off. Whatever she'd written was undoubtedly what she'd meant to write. She put on a robe and made her way to the Owlery to post the late night letter. Then, she returned to her room and her bed. By the time she fell asleep, she'd forgotten all about the letter as completely as she'd forgotten everything else.

But her second mind remembered. And while her first mind slumbered, her second mind recounted everything it had learned to her *third* mind, the one that Bathsheba Babbling almost *never* thought about. The one that remembered all the things that she could only allow herself to know when the time was right.

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The Hogwarts owl flew swiftly and delivered its message the next day while its recipient was taking lunch alone on a terrace in Marseilles. She gave the owl a treat and sent it along. After noting the unusually shaky (but still familiar) handwriting on the envelope, she opened the letter and carefully read its contents.

S—

*He is the one we seek, but I cannot say more. Powerful and terrible forces surround him. Tell your son to proceed with the utmost caution. Do not contact me again about these matters until I meet with you next summer. I will remember nothing of these affairs before I see you in person.*

*B—*

Below the sender's initial was a quotation in Latin: "*Novissima autem inimica destrucetur mors.*" And below that was a sigil of a triangle within a circle and bisected by a vertical line. Countess Zabini read the letter three times before wadding up the paper and incinerating it with her wand. Her eyes betrayed nothing of what she thought about the message, but her hand tightly gripped the black and silver medallion hanging from her neck through the fabric of her blouse even as she watched the paper burn.



# The Persistence of Memory

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## CHAPTER 18: The Persistence of Memory

**4 September 1993**

**4:15 a.m.**

**Hogwarts**

Luna Lovegood made not a sound as she made her way through the empty darkened hallways of Hogwarts. This was true even though she made no efforts towards stealth and even casually talked aloud to herself as she explored the castle in her own unique way: as part of a dream. She smiled as she considered the paradox.

"Am I truly soundless?" she asked herself as she floated past the doors leading to the Great Hall. "Simply because no one else can hear me while I'm dreaming? If an astral tree falls in an astral wood, does it make no sound just because no one around can hear it?" She shrugged and floated along.

To her, every night seemed a new adventure as she surveyed the castle in her dreaming form. Literally so, for she rarely remembered anything but the most important details from night to night and virtually nothing by day, despite her recent efforts to master lucid dreaming from the book Hermione had gotten her over the summer. Each night, as her dream body- her *heliopathic* self, she suspected - roamed the castle, she experienced a near-continuous state of *deja vu*.

"Or maybe it's the opposite of that," she said thoughtfully. "What's the opposite of *deja vu* again? *Jamais vu*? The feeling that something is unfamiliar even though you've seen it many times? I wonder how many times I've explored the castle from top to bottom and forgotten it all when I woke up the next morning."

She shrugged again in response to the question she'd posed to herself and continued her explorations. Tonight's journey took her near the office and rooms of the new caretaker Mr. Sturgeon. Now there was an interesting specimen, so interesting that she had to fight down the impulse to pass through the door into his room (for no physical barrier in Hogwarts had barred her so far ... that she recalled anyway) and see what his nargles and wrackspurts looked when he was unguarded in his sleep.

"No," she lectured herself sternly. "It would be improper if not indecent to spy on one of the staff in their sleep. Why, he might not even be wearing clothes!" She giggled for a second but then schooled herself into a more dignified expression. Having come to grips with the fact that she was not, in fact, delusional (a fear that had plagued her for many years), the young heliopath now endeavored to appear less odd to others. She only talked about fury-flies and wrackspurts and the like to people who truly understood what she meant, but she was still working to break bad habits like reading books upside down just provoke bafflement in others because she found the nargles produced by such harmless confusions to be remarkably pretty. She assumed giggling aloud over things that only she could perceive was another such bad habit.

In any case, she knew she had nothing to fear from Malachi Sturgeon, no matter how grumpy and surly he pretended to be. She was still learning the rules for what heliopathy

could tell her about the people of the physical world, but she knew perfectly well when someone was *faking* ill-temper. Fury-flies were, understandably, the first astral creature she learned to identify if not fully comprehend as they were the ones most dangerous to ignore. But there was no true anger in Mr. Sturgeon's snarling, only a quiet amusement and beneath that a strange persistent sadness. Oh, he had his secrets and kept them well (and Luna suspected he kept some secrets so well, he didn't even know them himself), but she was certain there was no malice in him. If nothing else, it was clear that Sturgeon and Jim Potter had a genuine fondness for one another though they sought to conceal it from everyone else for whatever reason they thought important.

Luna continued on her nightly trek through the castle's corridors until she eventually came to the staircase that led down to the Slytherin dungeons. She froze and gave out a soft gasp. For suddenly, her sense of *deja vu* (or *jamai vu*, perhaps?) was tinged with a sensation not just of familiarity but dread. Carefully, she edged forward and made her way down into the dungeons.

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Several minutes later, Luna shot up in her bed gasping for air as if awakening from a terrible nightmare. Quickly, she jumped out of bed and started fumbling through her bag in the dark in search of parchment and a quill.

"Luna?" said Betsy, one of her dorm-mates, in a sleepy voice. "What are you doing?"

Distracted, Luna looked up at her fellow Second Year but then paused with her mouth still open before looking down at the parchment in her hands in confusion. The young girl exhaled loudly in exasperation before closing her bag and

climbing back into bed. "I don't know, Betsy. But whatever it was, it's getting annoying."

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## **5 September 1993**

### **Slytherin Quidditch tryouts**

Despite Harry's initial concerns, Quidditch tryouts went relatively smoothly. He and team captain Adrian Pucey would remain as Chasers and would be rejoined by Fourth Year Graham Montague, who was a little standoffish towards Harry but not intolerably so. He wasn't as good as Flint had been, but he seemed capable of adapting well enough to the offensive scheme Harry and Adrian had devised. Miles Bletchley was returning Keeper, and while not as resilient as Oliver Wood, he was much better than the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff Keepers. Both Beater spots were open and had been filled by Gregory Goyle and, to everyone's surprise, by Millicent Bulstrode. To everyone's even greater surprise, Ginny Weasley decisively claimed the Seeker's position, handily beating out the fuming Cassius Warrington and the other contenders. Privately, Harry had expected her to win the spot, but even he was impressed when Ginny did better in her tryout than Draco had done in his the year before, though of course that was no guarantee of performance in an actual game.

Harry had been worried that Warrington's bigotries would cause dissension, as both Montague and Bletchley were friends of his and both of them also seemed somewhat scandalized by the presence of two females on the team for the first time in twenty years. Unfortunately for Warrington, he'd gotten as far as complaining loudly about not getting picked –

*"Damned if Slytherin House hasn't gone to the dogs  
with Halfbloods and blood traitors representing us in  
Quidditch.*

*It'll be Mudbloods on the team next!"*

- when he felt a firm hand grasp him by the right shoulder and spin him around violently. He barely had a second to realize it was Millicent Bulstrode who had manhandled him before the girl took a step forward and brought her knee up forcefully into his crotch.

As the boy crumpled to the ground with a whimper that caused all other boys present to wince in sympathy, Millicent just looked down on him with disdain. "Sometimes, Muggle ways are better, I think," she said before heading off with Ginny for the girls' locker rooms without so much as a backwards glance.

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**8 September 1993**  
**Gryffindor Tower**  
**11:00 p.m.**

An exhausted Jim made it back to Gryffindor Tower just before curfew and headed up straight to bed after his three-hour-long session with Mr. Sturgeon. Up in the Third Year boys' dorm room, Ron was the only one waiting for him.

"So, how was detention?" he asked casually.

"Oh, fine," Jim said evasively.

"You look tired. And pretty much drenched with sweat. What did he have you doing all this time?"

"Uh, polishing trophies. And some ... mopping."

Ron snorted but there was no humor in it. In fact, Jim thought his best friend was angry about something. "You're that sweaty from just mopping and polishing?" Ron asked. "And while we're on the topic of working up a sweat - except for running in the morning, we haven't had time for any sparring or kata practice. You don't want to get out of practice, do you?"

"Of ... of course not," Jim replied. "It's just been hard to find time."

Ron sighed and shook his head. "Jim, I don't understand why you're lying to me about this. I *know* you've spent the last three hours doing martial arts training during your '*detention*.'"

He made air-quotes around the last word. Jim swallowed nervously.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he exclaimed.

"Come on, Jim. I'm not the only one to have noticed. Padma asked me about it the other day, but I put her off. But she's way too clever not to figure it out assuming she hasn't already."

"Figure what out?" Jim said defensively. Ron began to grow indignant.

"Look, Jim, I'm dyslexic, not blind! I took me a while to recognize him at first, but just because he changed his clothes, let his hair and beard grow out, and started acting like a git, it doesn't mean I don't know perfectly well who Mr. Sturgeon really is!"

Jim did a double-take. "*Ron knows Remus's true identity? How did he break through the Fidelius?*"

"And who *do* you think Mr. Sturgeon, Ron?" he asked cautiously.

Ron shook his head in genuine anger at Jim's misdirections. "Oh come on! It's obvious! He's Brother Chandra!"

Jim opened his mouth to respond but then closed it again with a surprised pop as he realized the significance of his best friend's remark.

"Huh," he finally said.

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### ***The next morning in the Headmaster's Office...***

"So let me see if I understand the problem," Dumbledore said before popping a sherbet lemon into his mouth. "The secret we have put much effort into protecting with the Fidelius Charm that required six days of preparation time before casting states that '*Malachi Sturgeon is actually the werewolf Remus Lupin.*' However, while residing in Shamballa, you adopted a new identity as '*Brother Chandra*' which is not protected by the Fidelius."

"So it appears, Headmaster," Remus said with some resignation. "I suppose I should have mentioned that before you cast the spell, but it didn't occur to me that it would be relevant."

"It does raise some interesting questions." Dumbledore turned to Jim who was in the chair next to Lupin. "Did Ronald know that Brother Chandra's real name was Remus Lupin?"

"He did back in Shamballa," Jim answered. "But I don't think he remembers it now."

"Should we recast the Fidelius?" Lupin asked. Dumbledore looked thoughtful for a moment before shaking his head.

"No, I think not. At least not yet. Aside from the difficulty in dismissing and then recasting the spell, this may well provide us with a useful opportunity. Using a Fidelius in this manner is an innovative technique which we have adopted from the tactics of our enemy. This might present a chance to study that tactic and get a better feel for the spell's limitations if it turns out that he's employed it on other occasions."

"Who has?" Remus asked in confusion. "What enemy are we talking about?"

Dumbledore opened his mouth to speak but was surprised to find himself unable to do so. He coughed in mild embarrassment and turned to the Boy-Who-Lived. "Er, Jim, would you be so good as to reveal to Remus the secret you learned last spring from a certain diary? I find I cannot answer any of Remus's questions about Tom Riddle until you have done so."

Jim furrowed his brow in confusion at first. "Eh? Oh, right! Um, *Tom Riddle is actually the dark wizard called Lord Voldemort*. Or words to that effect."

Remus looked back and forth between the two. "Who's Tom Riddle?"

"As Jim just related, Tom Riddle is Voldemort's true identity. Tom was – and is – a Halfblood, the offspring of a Muggle and a squib, a fact that he concealed from his own followers through the same innovative use of the Fidelius that we have employed on your behalf. Jim and Harry learned the secret before the prior Secret Keeper was destroyed, and so both of them became the new Secret Keepers of



Voldemort's hidden background, though we are still keeping that truth under wraps at the moment for ... well, for tedious political reasons. Anyway, it is possible that he has used the Fidelius to conceal other things, though he would need other wizards or witches to assist him. Perhaps by studying the thought processes of people who knew you under another identity besides '*Remus Lupin*,' we can gain insights into how Tom has been using this spell over the years."

The Headmaster paused thoughtfully for a moment. "While we're on the subject, do you perchance have any other names we should know about?"

Remus grimaced. "James and Peter used to call me ... Moony. It was Sirius whom came up with it because ... well, you know."

"Ah," Dumbledore said as if his sherbet lemon had suddenly turned sour. "How very droll. I shall have to make arrangements for James and Peter to visit the school and interact with you in your Malachi Sturgeon persona to see how they react. Obviously, no such arrangements will be made for Mr. Black."

Then, Jim spoke up. "Harry knows that Remus Lupin and Brother Chandra are the same person. I wrote him last summer. But they've never met, and I haven't talked with him about Mr. Sturgeon."

Dumbledore nodded. "Very well. Jim, you may reveal to both Mr. Weasley and Miss Patil that Mr. Sturgeon is actually your former martial arts instructor Brother Chandra, who has come to Hogwarts in secret to help protect you from Sirius Black, which is technically true. And I suppose, Remus, that you are authorized to teach those three

students in your martial arts techniques, assuming Mr. Weasley and Miss Patil will also wish to resume their training. I must confess that I'm somewhat interested in seeing Wu Xi Do in action. I was aware of it, but my travels never took me to Magical Asia."

"Can we also reveal the full secret to Harry?" Remus asked hopefully.

Dumbledore looked thoughtful once more. "Bring him to me later today between classes. I will at least tell him *part* of the secret. I am curious to see whether he can figure out the rest."

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### ***History of Magic***

#### ***11:30 a.m.***

Unlike the majority of the Gryffindor-Slytherin History of Magic class (about half of whom were literally asleep in their desks), Harry Potter gave every appearance of being completely attentive. Of course, where Slytherins were concerned, appearances were often deceptive. In the next chair, Blaise Zabini, while stifling a yawn, took a sudden interest in his friend's attentiveness and leaned over to read the notes he was taking. To his surprise, Harry had drawn a line down the middle of the page. On the right side, he was taking casual notes about Professor Binns' excruciatingly boring speech about goblin revolts in the 9th century. On the left side, he was solving Arithmancy problems. Finally, Harry noticed the observation.

"What?" he asked.

Blaise leaned in more closely. "Are you Occluding right now?" he asked quietly and with some disapproval.

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, you caught me. I'm listening to Binns' droning while reviewing the highlights of my memories from yesterday's Arithmancy class. Turns out Binns isn't quite so boring when you only have to devote part of your brain to him." Then, he noticed Blaise's expression. "Is that a problem?"

Blaise glanced around to see who was listening and then hissed a response. "A problem? That you're running parallel thought-streams in class out of sheer boredom? Why should that be a problem? It's not like having two competing thought patterns is a good way to develop multiple personalities or anything."

"Three," Harry answered with a smirk. "One to take History notes. One to review Arithmancy. And one to wonder why the Headmaster wants to speak to me in his office later."

Blaise was surprised by that. "What does Dumbledore want?" he asked rather suspiciously.

"I dunno. That's why I trifurcated my mind to consider the matter, but I haven't figured it out yet. All I know is a prefect delivered the message while I was on my way to class. The Headmaster wanted to see me at the start of the lunch hour. Oh, and the password is *Zagnuts*, which is funny, disturbing, or both. By the way, is *trifurcated* a word?"

"I'm afraid to answer for fear you might try quadrifurcating next."

"Blaise, relax. I'm know the risks. And Snape's already assigned me a fake detention this Friday to go over my Occlumency and Legilimency progress. I'm sure if I show any signs of mental damage, he'll notice and take care of it."

"Fine. Just don't start talking to yourself or anything."

Harry snorted. "Why not? That might be the only way to get intelligent conversation around here."

Both boys chuckled softly at Harry's quip. And neither of them noticed their friend Hermione Granger in the back corner of the room, blissfully napping through the lecture.

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### ***Later in Gryffindor Tower..***

Fred Weasley and Lee Jordan were in the Common Room about to head to lunch when George and Percy found them.

"And what do you call this then?" George asked of his twin with surprising anger. "*This*," at the moment, referred to Colin Creevey who stood between the two Weasley prefects covered head to toe in bright yellow canary feathers.

Fred laughed. "I call it comedy gold, Brothers Mine! How are you feeling, Colin? No side effects? You haven't laid an egg or anything?"

"Nope," Colin answered cheerfully. "Well, it's a little itchy. Also, I have double-vision and feel a little nauseous. This *is* gonna wear off before I have to go to class this afternoon, isn't it? I have Potions next, and I don't think Snape will find it very funny."

"*Professor* Snape," Percy corrected absent-mindedly.

"Oh, it should wear off pretty soon, Colin m'boy." Fred frowned at the looks George and Percy were giving him. "Well, probably. If you haven't molted in an hour, we'll take you to the infirmary. On the bright side, if that happens, you'll get to *skip Potions entirely!* So let's stay optimistic!"

Colin's smile abruptly vanished to be replaced by a nervous grimace, while the glares directed towards Fred and Lee intensified.

"I cannot *believe* you gave a Canary Creme to a Second Year," George hissed. "You know we weren't planning on live testing until next summer!"

At that, Percy did a double take. "Eh? What *exactly* does *live testing* mean?" He asked cautiously.

"Pretty sure it means you and me, Percy," Ron said with a laugh from across the room. He and Jim headed over to join the conversation. Meanwhile, the elder brother looked back and forth between the Twins in disappointment. George blushed. Fred smirked.

"I'd had hopes that with George becoming prefect, it might be a sign that you two were finally maturing," Percy said ruefully. "It appears that was wishful thinking."

"Don't go blaming me, Percy," George said indignantly. "I had nothing to do with this. And even last summer when we were working on Canary Creams, I said it would be another *year* before it was ready." He gestured towards poor Colin, who suddenly hiccuped and burped out a few small feathers. "And I was right! He just got sick and sprouted feathers! He didn't turn into a bird at all!"

"Was that what I was supposed to do?" Colin asked excitedly.

Percy pinched his brow. "You actually volunteered to eat one of Fred's confectionary nightmares, and you didn't even ask what it did?!"

"Well, Fred and Lee called it a Canary Cream," the boy answered. "It sounded harmless."

"Yeah," George said sarcastically. "Except for the part where it was untested and didn't do what it was supposed to."

"How does *Canary Cream* sound harmless?" Jim asked in surprise. "Honestly, the name would imply that it's, I dunno, a *creamed canary* or something like that." Even Ron looked sickened at that description.

Meanwhile, Fred ignored Jim's question in favor of snarling at his twin. "You turning into a right Percy, you know that?"

"You do know I'm *right here*, don't you?" Percy answered. "Jim, would you do me a favor and escort Mr. Creevey to the Infirmary before he takes wing or something?"

"What about me?" Ron asked in surprise.

"I was hoping you'd stay here and help us yell at your brother for a while. Make it unanimous as it were."

"Oh no." Ron held up his hands defensively. "I'm way too young and immature for that. I'll help get Colin to Madam Pomfrey."

"Honestly, you lot," Fred said as if affronted. "The Canary Cream is perfectly harmless joke product. Just like everything else we've ever produced."

"A-*hem*!" At Fred's remark, Ron turned back towards him, stuck his tongue out, and pointed to the spot where a hole had been burned through it years before after the Twins had *experimented* on a normally harmless Acid Pop to "give

*it more kick.*" George winced again while Fred just rolled his eyes. Ron and Jim left with Colin.

"Anyway, Forge, if you were still helping me instead of prefecting around all day, maybe I'd have the creams working properly."

"Helping you?" George said incredulously. "And here I thought we were a partnership, Gred. I had no idea you were the brains all this time and I was just your *helper*."

"Boys," Percy interrupted, "we're getting a bit off track." But both twins ignored him.

"We *were* partners before you decided you were Percy Mark II, Mr. *I'm Gonna Test Into Ancient Runes*. Don't blame me because you broke up the team so you could pretend to be a Ravenclaw."

"Now Fred," said Percy. "That's hardly fair..."

"YOU LEFT ME!" George yelled in a fury, startling the room. "*You* were the one who decided to throw his future away on a stupid pointless gesture to save me when I didn't even need saving! You left me *ALONE* for the first time in our lives! So don't you go blaming me when I decided to make something of myself once you were gone!"

"Um, George?" said Percy.

"I *KNEW IT*!" Fred bellowed as he jumped out of his chair. "You *DO* think you're better than me!"

"Fred, that's ... that's not what George meant," stammered Percy with some alarm.

"*The HELL it wasn't!*" George said as he took a step forward to get into his twin's face. "I have been *stuck* to you like used chewing gum our whole lives. And the first time you're not around, I suddenly get my life on track and have teachers treating me with respect. So yeah, Fred. I'm really starting to think I am better than you. Because at least I'm willing to *try* to be something other than a merry prankster who terrorizes not just his House-mates but his own family!"

By this point, Percy was completely speechless. He had never even *heard* of the Twins arguing *at all*, let alone witness any confrontations like this. He feared they were about to come to blows.

"You are so full of it," Fred growled. "I could out-do you in any class if I had half a mind to, and you know it."

"I'll agree you've got half a mind, Freddikins!" George answered as his face grew as red as his hair. "You really think you could out-do me? Well put up or shut up!"

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"This is our OWL year, *Brother-of-Mine*," George said with an actual sneer. "You think you're better than me? I'll tell you what. You beat me on our OWLs in *any* class we share, and I'll drop Ancient Runes and resign as prefect. McGonagall can get someone else to do it next year. Maybe even *you* if you can back up all that big talk for once."

"YOU'RE ON!"

"GOOD!"

With that, the Weasley Twins angrily parted in opposite directions, George out of the tower and Fred up to his



room. Percy looked around the Common Room wildly, taking in the faces of all the other Gryffindors who were as shocked by the scene as he had been.

"What the hell just happened?" he said dazedly.

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***The Headmaster's Office***  
***Near the end of the lunch hour***

"Ah, Harry," Dumbledore exclaimed cheerfully. "Thank you for coming. Please take a seat."

"My pleasure, sir," Harry said easily as he took the empty chair between Jim and Malachi Sturgeon.

Still hidden (after a fashion) by the Fidelius, Remus took a moment to study the boy who many years before he'd offered to take in to raise as his own. He'd seen Harry from a distance, but this was the first time he'd truly been able to observe him, and the boy's appearance was striking, mainly in how he differed from Jim despite them being identical twins. True, Harry was noticeably smaller than Jim, though apparently not nearly as much as when he'd started Hogwarts. Nevertheless, Remus knew he'd never mistake one for the other, and not just for the difference in House colors. While Jim was a bit hyperactive and still somewhat gangly despite his months of Wu Xi Do practice, Harry moved with remarkable grace for a thirteen-year-old and appeared completely calm and composed despite having been summoned unexpectedly to the Headmaster's office. Likewise, Jim's unruly hair and wire-rim glasses were nearly identical to his father's, while Harry's coif was flawless and his fashionable black-rimmed glasses somehow heightened the fierce intelligence that Remus could see in the boy's bright green eyes. He suddenly wondered if Harry

was as heavily water-aspected as Jim had been fire-aspected months earlier.

"*Strange*," he thought to himself. "*Both the twins have green eyes like Lily's, and yet they seem different somehow.*" And then, suddenly, Remus understood – Jim's eyes were the same sparkling emerald green as Lily's were when she was laughing, while Harry's were more like the flashing vivid green of Lily's eyes when she was furious. He filed that away for future thought.

The Headmaster continued. "I have asked you here, Harry, to give you some confidential information and also to ask for your assistance with what I think can best be described as a *magical experiment*."

Harry crooked an eyebrow, and in response, Remus tilted his head as he continued to study the boy. With that mannerism, Harry looked even more like his mother – whether the boy knew it or not, he was now imitating Lily's infamous "*dubious mistrust*" expression.

"... certainly, Headmaster," Harry said with a smile. "I'm at your service."

Dumbledore nodded. "Good. Let me begin with a *re*-introduction. The man to your right, who I've previously introduced as Malachi Sturgeon, is actually Remus Lupin, a former Hogwarts student who was also a longtime friend of your family's."

Harry looked at Remus with some surprise. He knew that Jim had been studying in Shamballa under the man (and also that he and Jim had both been named after him after a fashion), but Harry had never seen a picture of him before. He wondered if Remus's presence was somehow connected with the Azkaban breakout. Then, the boy sighed

internally. *"Of course, it was related to Azkaban – Sirius Black, Lupin's former co-Marauder turned supposed traitor, was on the loose. Perhaps that explains why the man seems so ... twitchy."*

And Remus was indeed clearly anxious and ill at ease, though Harry was the only person in the room unaware that it actually due to the effects the impending full moon which was only two nights away.

"It's a pleasure to meet you at last, Mr. Lupin," Harry said aloud with a diplomatic smile.

"Likewise, Harry," the man replied. "And please, call me Remus." He stretched forth his hand. After an instant's hesitation, Harry grasped it and shook firmly while trying to ignore the sweatiness.

"From what Jim said, you were his martial arts instructor when he was in Shamballa. I suppose you're here to continue with that?"

Remus smiled. "Among other things. And ... if you're interested, I would like to teach you as well."

"Yeah, Harry!" said Jim, excitedly. "Please come! You'll love it!"

Harry's smile faltered slightly. "I ... appreciate that, Jim ... and Remus. Unfortunately, I'm taking a very heavy class load this year. Plus, there's Quidditch and the new dueling club. But I'll definitely come to watch a few sessions at least."

Then, Dumbledore spoke up. "While it is up to you whether you wish to join Remus, your brother, and some of their friends exploring the magical techniques known as *Wu Xi*

*Do*, Harry, I would like to ask to make it a habit of regularly spending time with Remus regardless. It pertains to that experiment I mentioned."

"Oh?" Harry inquired.

"Yes. You see, very few people know that the Caretaker Malachi Sturgeon is actually Remus Lupin, even among people here at Hogwarts who remember Remus from his school days. This is because Remus is actually under the effects of a Fidelius not unlike the one that Voldemort used to conceal his prior life as Tom Riddle. I'd like to take the opportunity to study the effectiveness of using a Fidelius in this manner, as Tom is not one to forego using a successful trick repeatedly."

Harry nodded. Certainly, Voldemort's creation of *at least* four horcruxes proved that to be true.

"To that end," the Headmaster continued, "I will now tell you that the full secret pertaining to Remus Lupin that is protected by the Fidelius Charm consists of *more* than the mere fact that he is hiding under the false identity of Malachi Sturgeon."

Harry was nonplussed. "So what's the rest of it, sir?"

"That is what I'd like you to figure out, Harry, if you can. You have, shall we say, a preternatural gift for deduction. You now know that Malachi Sturgeon is secretly Remus Lupin. I want to see if you can figure out what *other* secret Malachi Sturgeon has that I have *not* revealed to you so far."

The boy studied Remus somewhat suspiciously for a few seconds and then glanced over to the nearby window through which the bright noonday sun was streaming. "You're not a vampire, are you?" he asked cautiously.

"Certainly not!" Remus sputtered in response. "*How on Earth had the boy reached that conclusion*," he thought to himself. Both Jim and the Headmaster chuckled at Harry's first guess and Remus's indignant response to it.

"Okay, okay," Harry said apologetically. "Sorry ... I guess." He furrowed his brow. After a few seconds, he perked up. "Is it something to do with wolves?"

The other three looked at him practically thunderstruck, and Remus had a brief choking fit. "Why -cough - why do you ask?" he finally inquired after clearing his throat.

"Well, after I found out that I was partly named after you, I got curious and looked up your name which is, you have to admit, a bit unusual. *Remus* was someone from Roman mythology who was supposedly raised by a she-wolf. *Lupin* is from the Latin word for wolf. And your father's name *Lyall* is derived from Old Norse and also means wolf. So your name is basically Wolfy McWolferson. I assume that must mean ... *something*?" Harry looked at each of the other three, baffled at their expressions of shock.

Remus and Jim continued to stare at Harry in amazement, while Dumbledore broke out into a grin and his eyes twinkled merrily. "Very good, Harry, quite good indeed. That's not *exactly* the answer we're looking for, but you're on the right track."

Harry nodded and closed his eyes for a few seconds. Then, he opened them and turned back to Remus. "By any chance, is either your Patronus or your animagus form a wolf?"

Again, Remus was amazed. "Well, I'm not an animagus at all, but I do have a wolf Patronus. How did you guess?"

"Ancient Runes," Harry replied. "We spent some time talking about nomenographers and how names can be magically significant. Professor Babbling mentioned that giving someone a suggestive name might influence either their Patronus or their animagus form. Was that the other part of the secret?"

"Um, sorry but no," Remus answered with a slight wince. "As I said, I *do* have a wolf Patronus, but that's not a part of the Secret."

"Oh," Harry said disappointedly. "Well, in that case, I'm drawing a blank."

"That's quite alright, Harry," Dumbledore said. "Even if you fail to discover the secret despite your gifts, that is only further proof of the power of the Fidelius, and we will still know more about its capabilities than when we started. Continue to think on the matter." Then, the Headmaster paused and looked vaguely concerned for a moment.

"Unless, of course, you experience any headaches or other unusual symptoms that you think might be related to your inquiries into the Secret, in which case please desist at once and let me know. There is, alas, very little research about the limitations of the Fidelius, and while unlikely, it is not impossible that there might be mental side effects to actively trying to see through one. That's why I've already given you half the Secret. Do not even consider *any* inquiries into the Secret if you think there's any chance you might damage your mind in some way. It is, after all, your greatest resource."

"Understood, sir," Harry replied easily, and Dumbledore took him at his word. To his own surprise, he found himself occasionally grateful for the boy's Slytherin Sorting and the pragmatism that accompanied it. A similar warning to a

Gryffindor like Jim not to risk his health would practically be treated as an incitement. After a few more questions and answers, Dumbledore dismissed the two boys. Harry was almost to the door when he stopped suddenly, looked around the room, and then turned to Dumbledore.

"Do the portraits know the Secret?" he asked curiously.

Dumbledore glanced around the room in surprise. He had not actually considered how the moving portraits that covered most of his office would interact with the Fidelius. "An interesting idea, Harry. I will certainly investigate that topic. I do know none of them can pass on the Secret if they do know it so long as I remain Secret Keeper."

Harry nodded, and he and Jim left the office. Dumbledore turned to Lupin.

"Well, Remus, what do you think of young Harry?"

Lupin turned back to the old man with a smile. "Honestly, I was expecting a miniature James, like Jim is in many ways. But instead, he's so much like Lily that it's almost unnerving. That piercing way he looks at you to size you up. The way he furrows his brow in thought right before some brilliant epiphany. The way his eye twitches slightly when he's fighting not to say something sarcastic in front of authority figures. He gets all of those from her even though she didn't raise him." Then, the werewolf sighed as he recalled what he'd learned of Harry's upbringing. Dumbledore chose to change the subject.

"I was particularly struck by his deductions about your name. I'd never given it much thought, but *was* your name selected for nomenographic reasons?"

"Yes. It had been ... a tradition of sorts in the Lupin family to have a nomenographer select the names of newborns, from back in the days before we emigrated from France in the 17th century. Father never knew why, but he insisted in following the tradition when I was born." The werewolf's expression grew sadder. "My mother blamed my father for that. She was never anything less than loving to me even after I was bitten, but once Father explained to her how nomenography worked, she was furious. She felt certain that by naming me Remus Lupin, they had effectively *fated me* to become a werewolf. That they'd made it my *destiny*. It drove a wedge between them that lasted until the day she died."

Dumbledore said nothing. He knew all too well how Remus had suffered as a child, as a teenager, and as an adult. And also to what extent some of that suffering was the result of Dumbledore's own choices.

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***10 September 1993***  
***Harry's "Detention" with Snape***

On Friday afternoon, Harry had his first Occlumency/Legilimency lesson with Professor Snape himself as opposed to "Mr. X." He was pleased to learn that despite Blaise's fears, he was in no current danger of developing multiple personalities or any other psychological flaws as a result of maintaining multiple streams of thought for extended periods. In fact, Snape assured him that maintaining a secondary thought-stream at all times was perfectly safe, though opening a *third* stream was *adventurous* and not something to be done for extended periods of time.



"The true danger to such compartmentalization comes not from maintaining multiple thought-streams simultaneously," he said. "Rather, the risk comes from opening up multiple channels that *are not aware of one another*."

Harry was taken aback. "Why would somebody do that?"

"Several potential reasons. An Occlumens spends considerable time in the presence of one or more Legilimens while undercover or otherwise playing a role. Or an Occlumens wishes to commit a crime or some other illicit act while retaining no conscious knowledge of what he has done. It is for the latter reason that the testimony of known Occlumens is often disregarded in legal proceedings. For one sufficiently skilled in the art, it is a trivial matter to remember events differently depending on whether you are speaking to a collaborator or an investigator. Regardless, while '*nesting personalities*' are relatively safe if one is cautious and self-aware, improperly maintained thought-streams can result in the Occlumens coming to genuinely believe that the lies he tells himself are true. In the worst case scenario, the Occlumens may shift between one personality and another uncontrollably since personalities, ultimately, are but the summation of the memories which form them."

"Uh-huh," said Harry as he absorbed that. "So having two thought-streams is generally safe as long as neither of them is set up to believe lies. How many thought-streams are possible at once?"

"I would recommend against exceeding three, and in any case, I can't imagine why you would need to think about more than three different things at once no matter how boring you find Professor Binns's lectures to be. After three, the strain causes a progressively worsening migraine. Von

Mises claimed to have maintained five separate thought-streams at once, but the pain rendered him unconscious after just a few minutes. He concluded that there was likely no value in further research in that direction that would outweigh the probable health risks. Now, if you are quite finished discussing what is for the most part an Occlumency parlor trick, we can move on to the Legilimency portion of your detention."

Harry nodded and gripped his wand tightly as he peered into Snape's eyes. "**LEGILIMENS**," he intoned before hurling his meager psychic gifts against Snape's far stronger defenses. After fifteen minutes of exhausting effort, he had a relatively clear image of a young man's bedroom. The walls were adorned with Tutshill Tornados posters. On the bed was a comforter in Hufflepuff colors, and a Hufflepuff scarf hung from the bedpost. There was a tabby cat on the bed licking its paws. Suddenly, the cat jumped up to hiss angrily at Harry, its fur instantly standing on end. Startled, the boy was thrust back out into his own mind at once.

"Not bad, Potter. You are approaching *Acceptable*."

"Just Acceptable, Professor Snape? I was in your mind for quite a few minutes this time before the cat got me."

"Yes, but what did you do with that time, Potter? You know the cat is an Occlumency defensive trap and that you would have only a brief period to actually learn anything. And yet, all you did was stand around psychically gawking. Admittedly, your stealth has improved, but that avails you nothing if you don't learn anything useful before your inevitable discovery."

Harry frowned. "Well, honestly, I don't see what there was to learn. It was some Hufflepuff kid's bedroom."

The Potions Master sneered, which surprised Harry. Snape had not sneered at him in years. "I take it back, Potter. Poor bordering on Dreadful, if you are so foolish as to think that was just '*some Hufflepuff kid's bedroom.*' You should know better than that."

The boy thought for a moment. "Oh! That wasn't just a bedroom. That was your memory palace!"

Snape scoffed. "Of course not, Potter. That was Hubert Turnipseed's memory palace!"

"... who?" Harry asked in confusion.

"Hubert Turnipseed is a fictitious Hufflepuff whose false memory palace Mr. X used to cloak his own memory palace. Which, in turn, was but another false memory palace used to conceal *my true* memory palace."

The boy stared at his teacher. "Isn't that *exactly* the sort of thing you *just told me* might lead to multiple personalities?"

The man snorted contemptuously. "The Turnipseed and Mr. X personae remain completely dormant until I activate them as part of an Legilimency tutoring session. There is no danger of dissociation when all three of my active personae agree on which of us is *real*."

Harry gaped as he tried to process that. He was also mildly annoyed to realize that he intuitively knew what dissociation and personae meant even though he was sure he'd never heard the terms before. After Luna had pointed out that little quirk of his, he'd become increasingly perturbed every time he understood some obscure

terminology without knowing where he'd learned it. Harry briefly thought about sharing Luna's observations about his unnatural vocabulary skills with Snape but decided against it. For some reason, he didn't want any single person to know *all* the ways he was ... weird.

"*Not freakish*," he thought quickly. "*Just ... weird.*"

After another twenty minutes, the lesson concluded with Snape looking through his calendar to pick a date in October for Harry's next detention. Harry stood to leave but hesitated.

"Was there something else, Mr. Potter?" Snape's tone made it perfectly clear that he wanted the answer to be '*no*.'

"Just ... one thing, sir. I hesitate to ask and I wouldn't if I didn't have a very good reason, one which I'm afraid I can't disclose. But it really is important or I wouldn't trouble you with ..."

"Stop bleating like a Hufflepuff, Potter. What is it?"

Harry coughed into his hand. "It was my understanding, Professor Snape, that you were in the same Hogwarts year as a friend of James Potter's. A man called ... Remus Lupin."

It was always interesting to Harry that a man like Snape who was capable of perfectly concealing his emotions so often wouldn't bother to do so when the only witnesses were school children and other faculty members, as the man's flaring nostrils and flashing eyes could attest.

"I ... *recall* the man. What of him?"

Harry paused, while trying to figure out how to proceed without Snape *realizing* that Harry was trying to figure out

how to proceed. While his natural Legilimency made him remarkably persuasive, it didn't work nearly as well on people like Snape and Moody who were aware of it and thus could see through it.

"My brother met Mr. Lupin last summer in Shamballa. Studied under him for a time, in fact. Jim mentioned that Mr. Lupin suffers from some sort of obscure medical condition but was evasive about what it was. I was wondering if you knew anything about it. Or for that matter, anything else about Mr. Lupin that a non-Gryffindor in Jim's situation would find it useful to know."

Snape seemed to glare at Harry with enough fire in his eyes to *burn* his way through the boy's mind, but Harry never felt a touch of Legilimency. After several seconds, Snape finally spoke.

"I ... am aware of Lupin's condition but am unable to speak freely about it. If the Other Potter were my brother - and I actually cared about him as a human being - I would strongly discourage him from studying under Lupin. Or indeed spending any time with him. But I can say nothing more than that."

Harry nodded in understanding. "Thank you, sir." He turned and headed for the door when Snape called out to him.

"Will you be joining Professor Scrimgeour's Patronus class, Mr. Potter?"

The boy paused at the door. "I was planning to, sir."

Snape stared at him meaningfully. "It might behoove you to review the passage from your Defense text that covers Dementors. I believe you will find it on ... *page 394*."

Harry nodded again. "I'll review that information at once, sir. Thank you."

Snape had already sat back down at his desk and seemed to be ignoring the boy. Harry turned and left.

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Twenty minutes later, Harry was back in his room flipping through the DADA book. He quickly found page 394 and spent several minutes studying it intently, but for the life of him, he could find nothing that seemed relevant to Remus Lupin or his mysterious Secret. Just a lengthy entry about Dementors and a checklist for how to identify werewolves. He shut the book in frustration and returned it to his backpack. Then, after a few moments thought, he laid down on his bed and retrieved the two-way communication mirror from the side table drawer. He tapped it twice and said Sirius's name. Soon, the image of a yawning Sirius Black appeared in the frame.

"Hey, Harry. What's up?" Sirius said in a bleary voice that strongly indicated he had been sound asleep.

"I'm sorry to bother you this late, but I need to ask you a question."

"Of course, Harry. Ask away."

"Okay, now before I ask, I want to say that I *wouldn't* be asking you if it weren't important. And I promise you that I won't spread it around whatever the answer is."

"Harry...?"

"I figure you might think it's none of my business, but it's something the Headmaster asked me to do, and it may at some point be helpful against You-Know-Who."

"*Harry*," Sirius interrupted firmly. "What do you want to know?"

Harry bit his bottom lip and then asked. "I know that Remus Lupin has a big secret of some kind. And I'm pretty sure you know what it is. Can you tell me?"

Sirius's eyes widened. He hesitated. "This is something Dumbledore wants you to find out? But he already know Moony's biggest secret. That is, unless there's another not even I know about."

"I know Dumbledore already knows it. But he wants to see if I can figure it out on my own. I can't say anything more than that. I can only ask you to trust me."

Sirius nodded. "I do, Harry. I do." He looked around as if to make sure no one was listening, least of all his younger brother who would *not* react well to finding out this *particular* secret. "Okay, here it is. Remus Lupin is a werewolf."

Harry blinked several times. "Okay," he finally said.

"Is that it?" Sirius asked in surprise. "Any questions?"

"No," Harry replied. "That's all I needed to talk about. Get plenty of rest, Sirius. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Okay, Harry," Sirius said uncertainly. Harry deactivated the mirror and then returned it to his nightstand drawer. Then, he laid back in his bed, his brow furrowed in disappointment.

"*Damn*," he thought, "*I was sure Sirius would know what Remus Lupin's secret was. But he couldn't help me figure it out anymore than Snape could.*" Tired from his busy week,

Harry shrugged, turned out the lights, and quickly fell asleep.

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**11 September 1993**

**4:00 p.m. - The Hogwarts Dueling Club**

"Good afternoon, students," said Professor Scrimgeour. "Thank you all who decided to sacrifice a lovely Saturday afternoon in favor of spending your time in a dark dingy classroom learning how to hex one another for fun and profit and listening to me grumble at you."

Scrimgeour surveyed the assembled students. There were only about forty students in all, mostly Gryffindors and Slytherins. A few Hufflepuffs but surprisingly few Ravenclaws, despite the involvement of their Head of House. "*All in all not a spectacular start,*" he thought. He'd been told that the imbecile who preceded him as DADA instructor had gotten twice as many the year before, but then, Lockhart had apparently offered free food, which presumably helped to draw a crowd. Standing alongside Scrimgeour were Professor Flitwick, "graduate student" Marcus Flint, the Head Boy and Girl, and several prefects. Professor Snape was somewhat conspicuous by his absence. Although he had agreed to help with the Dueling Club, he was unable to attend the organizational meeting, supposedly because he was "*brewing*" today. Scrimgeour wondered how often that would end up being the ex-Death Eater's excuse for avoiding the former Chief Auror's presence.

Although the number of participants was less than Scrimgeour had expected (which was not a bad thing in his eye seeing as how he was not overly interested in competitive dueling anyway), the professor was pleased to



note the presence of several students in which he'd become *interested*. Both Potter boys and their respective coteries. The No-Name boy who was keeping a noticeable distance from anyone likely to be hostile to him. (He and Harry Potter had also avoided each other, but the patterns of their movements informed Scrimgeour that the two had choreographed the whole thing to conceal their continued friendship.) The Weasley Twins who, curiously, were avoiding one another.

"The purpose of this student organization is to provide formal training for competitive dueling for any of you who wish to pursue that career option. It is *not* for learning how to more efficiently hex and curse your classmates in the hallways. It is *not* for learning how to be a better criminal or worse a future Death Eater. It is *not even* for preparing for the Auror Academy. And above all, it is not for learning any Dark magic, however anyone chooses to define it. In a few moments, you will be divided up by Year, which is how future sessions will be organized. As you may have guessed, First Years are not allowed to participate since, at this point, they know no spells useful for any constructive purpose, let alone combat. The rest of you will be divided into groups A, B, C and D. Group A will consist of Second and Third Years and will meet for two hours from 7-9 on every other Tuesday beginning next week. Group B will consist of Fourth and Fifth Years and will meet for two hours on the *other* Tuesday beginning week after next. Groups C and D will consist of Sixth and Seventh years respectively and will meet on alternating Wednesdays from 7-9."

"The week before the Christmas break, we will have a tournament within each group, and students who perform well enough will be offered the chance to move into a higher bracket. The ultimate objective is to prepare at least

a few of you to participate in the European Student League Dueling Circuit next summer. That circuit has three levels of competition open to students aged 12-16: novice class, open class, and junior world class. For those of you who are graduating – and I suppose any younger students who prove to be genuine prodigies – your training will be preparation for entering the European Professional League Circuit, which is broken up into amateur class, open class, and professional world class, though should anyone choose to enter the professional circuit, you will be required to start in the amateur class and work your way up. Our hope is that at least some of you will demonstrate the natural skill and dedication to enter competition at an age- and skill-appropriate level without embarrassing your school and humiliating your families. A tall order, I know, but hope springs eternal."

"With that, I will turn the floor over to Professor Flitwick, who will explain all the tedious '*rules*' and other things that I can't be buggered to care about. Professor Flitwick?" Without even waiting for the Charms professor to reply, Scrimgeour hobbled over to take a seat. For his part, Flitwick clicked his tongue at his coworker's use of the word *buggered* before addressing the group.

"Thank you, Professor Scrimgeour for that ... *effusive* introduction. For the remainder of this introductory session, we will cover those aspects of competitive dueling that are common to all levels. Before you leave, if you have not already done so, please pick up one of the parchment sheets stacked on the table by the door. It will list all the spells legal for the various European League brackets. Please review them carefully as using any spell in a duel not approved for that level of competition or lower is grounds for automatic disqualification."

As the diminutive professor spoke, Harry glanced over the parchment he'd picked up when he'd entered. Already, he knew every spell on the novice list and nearly all the ones on the open class list. He wondered if it was arrogant to think he might be ready to compete in open class by the following summer. "*Probably so,*" he thought, "*if I didn't have an open class professional duelist back at 12 Grimmauld Place to help train me.*"

"We will begin with an introduction to dueling etiquette," Flitwick continued. "Another area where failure to properly follow the rules can lead to a loss of points if not disqualification. In the European Circuit, you will most likely be dueling under French rules or Bulgarian rules. While there are some nuances, the primary differences between the two lie in the size and shape of the dueling area and in the rituals that precede the start of the actual duel. In all types of competitive duels, the area in which dueling occurs is bounded by a special type of competition ward known as a Certamen Ward to prevent outsiders from being harmed. Under French rules, that area is relatively small, a rectangular area about fifteen feet wide and forty feet long. Competitors meet in the center, raise their wands in salute to one another, and then march back to their opposite sides and stand at ease while awaiting the instruction to begin. For those of you who observed the single session of the dueling club overseen last year by Professor Lockhart before it was disrupted by ... some unpleasantness, it was run under French rules. In Bulgarian rules, the dueling area is a circle about 100 feet in diameter. Duelists salute one another from opposite sides, and then slip directly into a dueling stance while awaiting the duel's commencement, usually in the form of a handkerchief or something similar that is levitated above the center of the circle and then allowed to drift down to the ground as a signal to begin."

Scrimgeour interrupted. "I've always suspected the Bulgarians preferred such rules because they never wanted to turn their back on an opponent. A sensible attitude, if you ask me."

"Thank you, Professor Scrimgeour, for your generous insights," Flitwick said with some asperity. "Now then, students, we will begin by teaching you proper dueling stances. Please assemble yourselves into a block, and I will review the proper bowing technique followed by several of the more common stances."

With some murmuring, the students arranged themselves into the desired block and awaited instruction, while the DADA professor entertained himself by observing how quickly the *interesting* students absorbed the day's lessons.

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### ***Later, a few hours before sunset ...***

For about the fiftieth time in the last hour, Remus glanced at the clock on the wall of his office. He'd grown increasingly anxious as the day had progressed despite his best efforts to meditate and maintain a spiritual balance. Back in Shamballa, he usually spent several days in meditation to prepare for the full moon, but that was not an option here while he was posing as the school's caretaker and thus couldn't simply disappear into his quarters for days at a time. He jumped slightly at a soft knock on the door. Dumbledore entered bearing a steaming goblet containing what he'd referred to as the Wolfsbane Potion, the last great innovation of the legendary Potions Master Damocles Belby.

"Headmaster," Remus said in surprise. "You didn't have to come here. I was waiting for you to send word to come to

your office."

"That's quite alright, my boy," he said as he put the goblet on the desk in front of his former student. "To be perfectly honest, the Caretaker's Office is nearer both the Infirmary and the Whomping Willow if something goes wrong with the potion. For that same reason, I will be accompanying you to the Shrieking Shack and remaining through your transformation."

Remus looked horrified and also somewhat embarrassed. "Albus, there's no need for that."

"I disagree, Remus. I owe it to you to oversee this process, for your peace of mind and my own. As per your instructions, I have had Hagrid acquire some fresh game from the Forbidden Forest, and house elves have already delivered it to the Shack."

Remus looked down at the steaming goblet with something like shame on his face. "Still ... it's been a long time since anyone has seen me ... like that."

"I know, Remus. I know. But if someone must, who would be better than me?" Dumbledore looked down at the goblet as well. "After all, it's nothing I haven't seen before."

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**12 September 1993**

**4:00 p.m.**

**Patronus Lessons**

The following day, a group of students (and, in fact, a great many of the same students) met in the same room for an introduction to the Patronus Charm. Scrimgeour's introductory speech was even briefer today before he handed over the group to Marcus Flint, who swallowed

almost painfully before addressing the group. Although he was taking one class (7th Year NEWTs Transfiguration under McGonagall) plus private Potions lessons from a student tutor, he wasn't actually considered a student. More to the point, he wasn't technically a Slytherin in any sense other than "Slytherin alumnus." At night, he slept in his room at the Three Broomsticks. He also ate breakfast there, but while he ate lunch and dinner in the Great Hall, Professor Scrimgeour had instructed him to move around regularly to the other Houses' tables so that he could answer any Patronus-related questions while obviating concerns about pro-Slytherin bias. Or at least that was the official reason. Unofficially, Scrimgeour had bluntly told him that Slytherin House had a "troubled" reputation as a result of the Wizarding War, so someone of his "less than stellar social standing" should take the opportunity to make new and hopefully influential friends.

After lengthy discussions with Scrimgeour and also every staff member who he knew could cast the Charm, Marcus decided that the best approach would be to follow the path set by Gilderoy Lockhart with Team Protector, though with an accelerated schedule. That is, they would begin with carefully monitored Boggart Banishing spells to get used to maintaining contradictory emotional states (i.e. laughing at something normally terrifying) and other increasingly complex esoteric spells before moving on to the Patronus which has some of the most demanding mental requirements of any esoteric spell - that the caster maintain a picture of his happiest memory while under fear- and despair-inducing conditions. While many of the students were unhappy at the thought of facing a boggart, Marcus reassured them that no one would be allowed to observe anyone else's fears - he gave Jim Potter a brief glare at one point - and he stated that he would be willing to swear an oath of secrecy about anything he witnessed if asked.

Flitwick and Scrimgeour both expressed surprise at that policy. Apparently, the "traditional" approach to dealing with boggarts was simply to have several people approach it together but from different angles. If there were too many people in close proximity, a boggart would become confused as to which form to take and thus be more vulnerable to the Riddikulus. Apparently, Lockhart had gone with one-on-one boggart training instead because the goal of the lesson was to master esoteric requirements rather than simply to banish the creature as efficiently as possible.

After further discussion about the Patronus Charm (and a display of Ironside that the students found suitably impressive), Marcus set up a meeting schedule for the group over the next several weeks. Then, the students drifted out of the room. Theo No-Name was the first out the door, having already learned the hard way to exit quickly so that he could get ahead of anyone who might otherwise lay in wait for him. As they were leaving, Harry noticed that Jim's expression seemed troubled, so he went over to talk with his brother.

"What's up, Jim?" he asked. "You seem down for some reason. I thought you'd be excited about learning the Patronus."

He shrugged. "I am ... about that part of it. It's the boggart that has me worried to be honest."

"Come on. You're a Gryffindor. I can't imagine a boggart that's too scary for you to worry about."

"It's not that it's ... scary. But ... Harry, I've *seen* my boggart. Last year, back when ... you know."

Harry nodded. He assumed "*you know*" was Jim's oblique way of referring to that time he ended up hospitalized from

boggart exposure due to a prank by Jim that went wrong. But he was unaware until now that Jim had taken the opportunity to meet the boggart himself.

"Honestly, it's not even scary," Jim continued. "But it is ... *embarrassing*. In a "*this could end up on the front page of the Daily Prophet*" sort of way."

Intrigued, Harry popped his wand and cast a Muffliato. "What was it?" he asked.

Jim looked around, as if nervous someone could hear through the privacy charm. "It was ... a succession of friends and family all telling me how much I sucked at being the Boy-Who-Lived and that Voldemort was going to come back and kill everyone and it would be my fault."

For a brief second, Harry almost laughed at the idea of Jim's boggart fear being nothing but insecurity made manifest. But then he caught himself. Over the last year, he'd been forced to appreciate the burdens that Jim carried as the Boy-Who-Lived. For someone who was expected to be the savior of his entire nation if not the world, insecurity and lack of self-esteem might well be more problematic than actual tangible dangers. Harry considered the problem.

"This was last fall when you encountered the boggart?" he asked. Jim nodded solemnly. "Okay, you've got an advantage none of the others have. It turns out that the school's caretaker is secretly your psychic arts guru. And I'd bet good money that he also knows how to handle boggarts. Get him to help you prepare after hours for the next meeting. And who knows? Maybe your boggart has changed since then. You've been through a lot. You've faced another version of Voldemort. You even killed his pet



basilisk. Maybe you've gotten over that particular fear, at least enough for it to not trigger a boggart."

Jim nodded and smiled. "Thanks Harry!" Harry dispelled the privacy charm, and the two brothers rejoined their respective social groups and left the room. Rufus Scrimgeour watched the Potter brothers depart together, thankful not for the first time that years earlier, he had learned to read lips.

## Chapter End Notes

AN 1: Some clarification about Remus's Fidelius may be helpful to readers going forward. The Secret is "Malachi Sturgeon is actually the werewolf Remus Lupin." The fact that Remus Lupin is a werewolf by itself is a secret but not actually a Secret. Ditto the fact that Remus Lupin is also known as Brother Chandra.

A. The people who know all of those facts include Remus himself, Dumbledore, and Jim.

B. The people who know that Malachi Sturgeon is Brother Chandra but not the other facts about him include Ron and soon Padma. Anyone who is told by any means that Malachi is also known as Chandra will be able to retain the knowledge.

C. The people who only know that Malachi Sturgeon is actually Remus Lupin (aka Brother Chandra) but nothing else about him consists of just Harry at the moment. He is presently incapable of knowing that Sturgeon/Lupin is a werewolf or retaining that knowledge if told by someone other than Dumbledore.

D. Everyone who ever knew that Remus Lupin was a werewolf still knows it. They're just incapable of

knowing that the person who calls himself Malachi Sturgeon is really Remus Lupin even though he looks exactly like Remus Lupin with shaggy hair and a beard. Technically, it would have been possible to make everyone forget that Remus had ever been a werewolf, but it would have made the Fidelius much more difficult to cast, even for Dumbledore.

E. The Fidelius is weird.

AN2: "Jamais vu" is a real thing. You can trigger it in yourself by picking a common word like "soap" or "bird" and trying to write it as often and as quickly as you can for a minute. By the end, most people will suddenly think that the word is strange-looking and somehow unfamiliar, and a significant number of people will actually become briefly convinced that it's not a real word at all. Comedian Steven Wright's "Vuja De," on the other hand is fictitious but still amusing.

# Prelude (Unspeakable Bode)

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## Chapter [ *REDACTED* ]: Broderick Bode and the Chime of Calamity

### [ *REDACTED* ] 1993 The Early Warning Office Department of Mysteries

Unspeakable 029 sat alone in the Early Warning office with his feet propped on the desk. It was his lunch break, and he alternated between bites of the somewhat greasy Cornish pasty his wife had prepared and working on the *Daily Prophet's* crossword puzzle. At the moment, he was stumped on 7-Down (*Eight letters. Ends with y. "A disastrous event"*). Crossword puzzles were all he had at the moment to alleviate his boredom, which was odd because one might expect the Department of Mysteries to be the least boring part of the Ministry of Magic.

Nine times out of ten that expectation would be correct, but unfortunately, Unspeakable 029 – Broderick Bode when not on the job – had drawn the short straw and was stuck in the 10% boring part – the very most boring part, in fact. It was the policy of the Unspeakables to regularly (and randomly) rotate its membership among its various departmental duties so that every Unspeakable would have some knowledge of everything the secretive department did. For the past four years, he'd been lucky and drawn some exciting or at least interesting jobs. Admittedly, some of them were also *terrifying* jobs, but fear was a luxury

Unspeakables could seldom afford and was less seldom tolerated.

Alas, Bode's luck had run out, and for the foreseeable future, he was assigned to "Early Warning Duty." The job consisted of Bode (and a few other Unspeakables who worked in shifts) sitting in this small office day after day ready to alert the department if any of the fifty-seven chimes hanging on the office walls sounded for any reason. Many of them were warnings of fairly innocuous events, and the most banal simply duplicated the warning systems of other departments as backups. For example, Chime #36 sounded with some regularity as it monitored incidents of accidental magic in public places. There was, of course, an entire department dedicated to monitoring such incidents, but the Unspeakables quietly made a point of double-checking their work. It would not do for some poor Muggleborn to become an Obscurial because a Ministry bureaucrat had been lax in his duties. And so the Unspeakables kept a duplicate file on every bit of accidental magic that occurred in Britain and followed up if anything went *weird*, things going *weird* being an essential element of an Unspeakable's job description.

Other chimes were less *weird* and more *nightmarish*. Chime #16 would alert the Unspeakables if the inhabitants of the Brain Room were in danger of rousing themselves from slumber to once more plot against the Ministry. Chime #43 would activate if there were any disturbances emanating from a certain pond in the Forest of Dean that was normally concealed by five wards and a dozen Notice-Me-Nots and Muggle-Repelling Charms. The pond was deemed Unspeakable because it was not full of water but rather what appeared to be a vast quantity of human blood. And also because from time to time, *things* emerged from it, though the Unspeakables had not been called upon to

sterilize the area in many years. Chime #9, meanwhile, would let the Unspeakables know if someone or something came *out* of the Veil of Death. As far as anyone knew, that was utterly impossible, but better safe than sorry.

Of course, the *most* worrisome chime in the Early Warning Office was also the oldest and the largest. Chime #1 was one of the original seven chimes that had been placed here by the druids untold centuries ago, back when there was no Early Warning Office with a comfy chair, a battered desk, and oak-paneled walls. Long the Romans came, saw, and conquered, this chamber had been nothing but a rough-hewn cavern, and like most of what later became the Department of Mysteries, it had been carved out of the living rock by the forgotten magics of ancient pre-Roman wizards deep below what would one day become Londinium and later London. The Cavern of Seven Dooms, they'd supposedly called this particular chamber. Happily, Chime #1 had never sounded, not in all the time the Department of Mysteries had guarded this chamber after transfiguring it into an unassuming office (and later adding more chimes for things and places that must always be monitored and for events that must never occur).

Personally, Bode thought that Chime #1 would never sound. After all, Stonehenge and its sister sites were as protected against disruption and sabotage by all the power that the Unspeakables could bring to bear, and that power was considerable. And even then, if it came down to it, the Department of Mysteries still had records of the practices and rites of their druid forerunners. If Chime #1 ever sounded and the Old Gods of Britannia returned, the Unspeakables knew perfectly well how to properly fill and deploy a Wicker Man.

Bode took another bite of his pasty as he continued his struggle with 7-Down. Then, he very nearly choked at the sound of a loud sonorous *bong*. After coughing for a few seconds, he took a swig of tea and then rose to determine which of the chimes had interrupted his lunch. With the second and third *bongs*, he realized that the affected chime was quite near the front of the room, and for a brief instant of panic, he thought it had been Chime #1 and his overconfident musings had mocked Fate and brought doom upon them all. But no, Chime #1 was still silent and immobile. Those-Who-Wait-In-Darkness were waiting still.

His sense of relief soon ended, however, when he realized that the ringing emanated from the nearby Chime #4. Unlike Chime #1, the fourth chime *did* sound with some regularity, but typically no more than once or twice a century. Bode was not old enough to remember its last activation, but naturally, he'd read the file and been suitably horrified. He'd also held out hope that he would grow old and die before Chime #4 activated again, but apparently that hope had been in vain. The wizard swallowed deeply and touched Chime #4 with his wand to silence it. Then, he returned to his desk to log the time of its activation before pulling a small mirror from a drawer and tapping it three times. When Unspeakable 001 appeared within the frame, Bode gave his report.

"This is Unspeakable 029. The fourth chime has just sounded this day at twenty-seven minutes past the hour. Please have the Cryptohedron checked immediately for signs of activity. Message ends."

"Message received and forwarded to appropriate staff."

The Head Unspeakable ended the communication without inquiring further of Bode. Unsurprising since, after

reporting the probable activation of an Omega-Level artifact, his job as the Early Warning monitor was complete. Whatever happened next would be the responsibility of others. He wasn't sure whether to be disappointed to be out of the loop or relieved to be free of the responsibility. Bode returned the mirror to the drawer and looked back down at the crossword puzzle before barking out a surprised laugh.

*"Of course,"* he thought. *"Eight letters. Ends with y. 'A disastrous event.' How appropriate for the times."* He picked up his pen and filled in the blanks with precise penmanship that barely showed any signs of a shaky hand.

*C-A-L-A-M-I-T-Y.*

## Chapter End Notes

NOTE: This chapter was supposed to replace the prior chapter 84 which was nothing but an Author's Note. Then, the prior chapter 84 got deleted completely on accident which shifted all the prior chapters up one. So now, it's the new chapter 101. Chronologically, however, the events of this chapter happened during the summer of 1993. Sorry about any confusion.

# Hogsmeade (pt 1)

## CHAPTER 19: Dementors, Divinations, and a Day in Hogsmeade

***19 September 1993***  
***Hogwarts***

Over the next few weeks, Hogwarts settled into a routine that accommodated the presence of the nearby Dementors. In Ancient Runes, Professor Babbling continued her painstaking analysis of the Elder Futhark runes, while in Arithmancy, Professor Vector was even more exhaustive in her lectures on the importance of the number 7. Meanwhile in Muggle Studies, Lily Potter announced that the class would be spending some time exploring Muggle pop culture through the time-tested Mugglish teaching tool known as *book reports*. To facilitate that, she placed several dozen paperback books popular among young Muggle readers in the school library for her students to read and give a report on by the end of term. To Hermione's surprise, she'd already read most of them and had actually brought copies of a few of them in her trunk for light reading.

Although fewer students spent time out on the grounds compared to years past, Quidditch practices continued uninterrupted despite the frightful observers, and during the Slytherin practices, Harry was pleased to see that Ginny, Greg, and Millie were all integrating into the team's dynamic smoothly. That said, he did have some concerns about the Dementors continually hovering over the nearby Forbidden Forest. Or more accurately *one particular* Dementor who (unlike his fellows) seemed intensely focused on the Slytherins' activities. Harry wasn't sure, and admittedly had no way to *be* sure. But some



strange instinct, perhaps related to his Legilimency, told him that the Dementor who had drawn his attention was the same one that had tried to attack Harry and Jim on the Hogwarts Express.

*"[I/We] kNoooW [your] FaAaAaAaCE [**DIE! DIE! DIE!**]"*

Harry shuddered at the recollection and wondered if Jim's memories of what had happened on the train were as intense. Then, he frowned as he recalled seeing first hand how vivid Jim's impressions of the Dementor had been. He knew all too well what effect that experience had on his brother.

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### ***Earlier that week ...***

With some reluctance, Harry had agreed to attend a few of the Wu Xi Do classes that Malachi Sturgeon (who went by the name "Brother Chandra" when teaching those not aware of his Secret) would be providing for Jim, Ron, and Padma. To Harry's own surprise, after he mentioned the classes to his friends, Theo No-Name announced an interest in attending. The boy had decided to be proactive in dealing with any conflicts with students affected by the Ultimate Sanction, and he'd further decided that would include learning an obscure magical technique that also doubled as a form of self-defense. Thus far, no one had attempted any real physical harm (besides the occasional Tripping Jinx in the halls when he couldn't tell who was responsible). If nothing else, from what the two Slytherins had learned, Wu Xi Do would probably help with ducking and dodging.

And to Harry's own surprise, he and Theo both excelled in their first training session, almost to the point of making Jim and Ron mildly jealous. But then, Chandra reminded the

boys that they were focusing on water-aspected Wu Xi Do *specifically* for a therapeutic reason: correcting Jim's own fire-water imbalance. Since Harry and Theo actually *were* Slytherins, it made sense that they would both adapt more readily to what he was teaching. That explanation mollified Jim, even more so when Brother Chandra decided to change things up with a few basic earth-aspected moves with which *none* of the students were familiar let alone naturally proficient. After all, none of them was anything close to a Hufflepuff.

It was after the third session that Jim quietly asked Harry to remain behind. After sending Ron, Theo, and Padma on their way, the two boys joined Remus (a name they were now free to use since those who didn't know any part of the Secret had departed). Just as Harry had suggested, Remus had acquired custody of the boggart that would be used in future Patronus classes. And judging by the steamer trunk it was hiding in, it appeared to be the same boggart that both Potter boys had encountered a year before. Harry had agreed to witness Jim's attempt to banish his boggart, but he had one question.

"Why me? Not that I don't want to help if you need me, but I figured you'd want Ron here."

Jim looked wistfully at the door. "Ron's my best friend. I'd trust him with my life. But ... I don't know what my boggart looks like. I'm worried that knowing about my innermost fears might ... upset him."

Harry nodded in understanding. "The last time, it was people you knew mocking you. And now you're worried that it might manifest as Ron saying something hurtful."

"Basically," the other boy as he glanced nervously at the trunk.

"Jim," Remus asked, "are you ready?"

Jim nodded and moved closer to the trunk as Remus stepped away. As the older man cast the spell to open the trunk, Jim steeled himself to cast the Riddikulus even as he wondered which of his friends and family would be the first to appear and accuse him of being a fraud as the Boy-Who-Lived. To his great and terrible surprise, it was none of them. His boggart fear had indeed changed in the previous year.

Into a Dementor.

Jim had been prepared for cruel mockery, not for a boggart in the shape of a Dementor and certainly not for one that seemed to have a Dementor's powers. Despite his preparation, terror washed over the boy in a wave, along with an unearthly coldness and a complete loss of happiness. Somewhere in the distance, he heard a woman's scream, and he began to swoon. Then, the boggart-Dementor floated towards him ... and spoke.

*[I/We] kNoooW [your] FaAaAaAaCE [**DIE! DIE! DIE!**]*

As Jim started to faint, Harry rushed forward with his own wand drawn. But before he could cast the Banishing Charm, the boggart reacted to his closer presence. The creature's pseudo-flesh flowed like mercury until image of the Dementor was replaced by that of the rotting corpse of Vernon Dursley, once again pointing a maggot-ridden finger at Harry in accusation.

*"Murderer! Freak!"*

Fortunately, Harry was quite prepared for this particular illusion, and while boggart-fear could be potent, it was nothing compared to the nightmares produced by one of Voldemort's horcruxes. "**RIDDIKULUS!**" Harry slashed his wand with confidence, and in response, the Vernon-boggart kicked its legs up into the air, stuck both feet into its mouth, and started slurping greedily. In an instant, the creature's entire body had been sucked inside until Vernon's leering mouth was all that remained before it too disappeared with a pop. The lid of the trunk slammed shut.

Remus, who had also rushed forward to banish the boggart, was at once surprised, pleased, and confused at Harry's actions. Surprised and pleased at his swift and effective spellcasting, but confused as to the form of his boggart. Luckily, he was close enough to catch Jim before the boy fell to the floor.

"Well done, Harry," Remus said as he lowered Jim to the ground. Harry knelt on the other side of Jim with a worried expression. "Your boggart. If you don't mind me asking..."

"It was Vernon Dursley," Harry said without taking his eyes off his brother. "He was my guardian - sort of - up until his death last October. Heart attack."

Remus nodded but did not ask the next obvious question: If it was a heart attack, then why did Harry feel so guilty about it that his boggart accused him of murder. He hoped to have a chance to talk to the boy later, as it was clear that staying with the Dursleys had affected him even more deeply than he'd feared.

Meanwhile, Harry gently shook Jim's shoulder. "Come on, Little Brother, time to wake up. The Boy-Who-Lived can't go

fainting every time a Dementor shows up and says *boo!* What will your adoring public think?"

As Jim came to his senses, he ignored Harry's jibes and frowned. "Who was screaming?" he asked. "And why did that Dementor say he knows my face?"

Harry's eyes widened. "The boggart-Dementor said that? The real Dementor on the train said that to me! I thought you'd already passed out by then."

"I had," Jim said with a shake of his head. "I don't remember that Dementor saying anything." He frowned. "Why would a Dementor say that he knows our faces?"

"Strange," said Remus as he helped the boy up. "To be honest, the fact that it spoke *at all* is remarkable. I've never heard of Dementors communicating verbally with anyone other than the staff at Azkaban."

"Hmph," Harry said with a mischievous smirk. "I bet it recognizes *you* as the Boy-Who-Lived and just got confused because we're twins. Honestly, Jim, is there *nowhere* your fanclub doesn't reach?"

"Hardy-har-har," Jim said rolling his eyes.

After making sure that Jim was okay and feeding both brothers chocolate bars, Remus sent them to bed. He also made a point of reassuring Jim that there was nothing embarrassing about his boggart fear. "If anything, it's a sign of your remarkable courage. It seems the only thing you fear is ... fear itself."

"Pfft. Gryffindors," Harry said with an exaggerated sigh.

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As September passed into October, Harry, like most of his peers, settled into a steady if hectic routine. He had a full class schedule that included two demanding electives, Quidditch practice several days a week, and the dueling club. It also included the Patronus class, and while Harry felt no closer to a true corporeal Patronus, Theo, Ron, and Hermione (among others) had the beginnings of a mist Patronus though it still eluded an increasingly frustrated Jim. Finally, there were bi-weekly meetings for S.P.A.M. in which he helped Hermione guide the club towards researching ways to weaken or break mind control effects like the Sanction, along with research on how the British wizarding government actually worked (both politically and magically). Their biggest obstacles were Anthony Goldstein and Sue Li, both of whom seemed far more interested in figuring out how to make Muggle televisions and computers work in magical environments than in getting drawn into what might well become a socio-political conflict.

After a few more training sessions, Harry chose to drop out of Brother Chandra's martial arts classes simply due to lack of time. And also, to be honest, due to a lack of interest. He understood that there was a place and time for hand-to-hand combat and that the specific kind of hand-to-hand combat Chandra was offering was practically *designed* for Slytherins. But the heart of the matter was that to Harry's Slytherin personality, resorting to physical combat (even magical in nature) meant that you had already lost the battle of wands. There was, after all, a reason he stubbornly spent five to ten minutes every night vainly trying to summon his wand to his hand from across a room: Harry honestly felt that if a wizard was ever caught without a wand at the ready, he pretty much deserved whatever happened to him.

But while Harry made his apologies to a somewhat disappointed Remus Lupin, Theo No-Name actually chose to continue. As he explained to Harry and Blaise, whatever the practical value of Wu Xi Do, it couldn't possibly hurt to cultivate a relationship with the Boy-Who-Lived, one that might lead people who were on the fence about the whole "No-Name" thing to think more positively of him. Also, since Theo and Harry had agreed not to maintain a public friendship, it would have reflected poorly on Harry if the other Slytherins had learned he was taking lessons in some exotic magical technique from the Caretaker while in the company of *both* the Outcast and the Boy-Who-Lived. Since Theo actually was interested in the lessons Brother Chandra offered, it made sense for him to be the one to continue them while Harry withdrew.

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***8 October 1993***

**Hogsmeade**

**The Tonks Clinic and Residence**

**3:00 a.m.**

Ted and Andromeda both awoke instantly at the sensation of their home's wards being breached a split second before they registered the sound of the glass shattering downstairs. Ted was the first one to jump out of bed and grab his wand, but Andi was close behind.

"Stay here," he said automatically. "I'll check it out." Then, he flinched at the look his wife gave him.

"*Stay here?*" she spat. "I'll ignore the inherent chauvinism in that comment and simply remind you that *I* was the one who took an O on my DADA NEWT!"

Ted gulped and then cracked a smile. "Well, you know what they say: There's no vinism like chauvinism!"

At that, Andi punched him in the arm before stalking out of the bedroom, her husband close behind. In the second floor hallway, they met up with Nymphadora who also seemed ready for battle. Andi told Dora to go back to her room, a sentiment that was taken even less well than Ted's earlier comment to Andi, and after a brief whispered argument, all three crept downstairs.

There were no signs of an intruder, but there was a smashed window, and on the floor below it sat a brick with a message tied to it. Iris, the house elf, stood on tip-toe to peer out another window, but she reported with some anger that whoever threw the brick was long gone. With a flick of Nymphadora's wand, the message was summoned from the brick and levitated in front of the three.

"NO OUTCASTS IN HOG'S MEED!" it said in crude block letters.

Andi scoffed even as she cast a Reparo to fix the broken window. "It takes a special kind of imbecile to misspell Hogsmeade in a hate letter urging us to banish Theo from it."

Her daughter, the auror-in-training, was more thoughtful. "An imbecile. Or maybe just someone who's not from around here."

After checking the perimeter and casting some stronger protective wards, the Tonkses agreed to contact the DMLE in the morning. Then, they returned to bed, not noticing as they went that Iris stayed behind to study the brick with an expression perhaps best described as a mixture of fear, sadness, and resignation.



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## ***Meanwhile ...***

On the other side of Hogsmeade, Fenrir Greyback gestured with his wand. Well, *he* considered it his wand. It had picked him, after all, when he claimed it from the corpse of the prior owner who he'd killed and devoured years before. In response to the werewolf's movements, a thick black liquid drifted up out of a cannister onto the wall of Quality Quidditch Supplies to spell out "OUTCAST! GET OUT OF HOGSMEADE!" in graffiti. Fenrir had already left such messages on four other buildings around town. According to Pettigrew, the potions added to the black paint would make it extremely difficult to remove the graffiti. More importantly, they would have the special benefit of putting *ideas* into the minds of villagers who saw the messages. Or if not *ideas* then at least *predispositions*. It probably wouldn't affect people naturally immune to the Ultimate Sanction, but it would certainly heighten the normal reaction among those who were affected. Not that Fenris cared about the Sanction one way or the other, but in this instance, it was certainly convenient for their plans.

According to the *Daily Quibbler*, this same potion was sometimes added to the ink used in the *Daily Prophet* to cause its readers to consider it more a more credible news source. Neither Fenrir nor Peter knew whether that conspiracy theory was true or not (probably not given Xeno Lovegood's reputation), but they were both amused at the irony in Peter's current plan. If everything worked right, the same Ultimate Sanction that Tiberius Nott used as a vindictive punishment for his younger son would also aid in snatching his future bride right out of his clutches during their upcoming meeting in Hogsmeade.

There was a soft pop as Stavros, a member of Fenrir's pack, apparated to his side, his mission to the Tonks Clinic completed.

"It's done," he said before taking in Fenrir's work with a furrowed brow. "Is that how you spell *Hogsmeade*?"

Fenrir glared at Stavros, who blanched at the werewolf's expression. It was unwise to be flippant to one's alpha the night before the full moon, after all. Fenrir packed up the rest of the magical paint he'd been using and apparated back to their base with Stavros following a second later.

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### ***Somewhere, Sometime...***

*The little boy had been lost in the woods for longer than he could remember, and as the night got colder, he'd ended up huddled under a tree sobbing quietly and shivering both from the cold and from fear. For he knew that there was a monster after him, a great and terrible monster that would devour him whole if it caught him. Then, the boy gasped in terror as a demonic howl erupted from farther into the woods. It was some distance away, but closer than the last time he'd heard it just a few minutes before. The boy began to weep piteously. He was alone and cold and the monster would be here soon. Then, as that thought rippled through his terrified mind, the boy heard another sound much closer. He turned and saw that the bushes just a few feet away were rustling as some thing pushed its way through them. And the distant howl that had so frightened the boy was now replaced by a different animal sound. A low, hungry growl.*

*The bushes parted, and the boy screamed.*

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**10 October 1993**

**The Shrieking Shack, Hogsmeade**

**7:20 a.m.**

Remus Lupin awoke with a loud gasp to find himself nude on the dusty wooden floor of the Shrieking Shack, then he rose slowly and gingerly while trying to get his bearings. The Wolfsbane Potion had allowed him to retain most of his human intellect during his transformations, but it did very little for the lingering pain of having all the bones in his body reshape themselves and then do so again eight hours later, nor did it allow him many clear memories of the prior night's events. On the bright side, there were no new scars on his body, though he did suffer the sensation of something gamey stuck between his teeth.

"Ah yes," he recalled. "*There had been a deer carcass here last night, hadn't there. Hagrid's doing.*" He barely had time to notice the gory remains lying on the floor across the room when a cheerful voice made him jump in surprise.

"Good morning!" said Dumbledore brightly. "And how are you feeling today, Remus?"

Remus looked around and saw the older man sitting behind him at a small breakfast table that had not been there the night before. There was a covered silver tray on the table, but even from across the room, Remus's acute senses could detect eggs, juice and bacon.

"Neither as tired nor as sore as normal, Headmaster. Though perhaps a bit embarrassed to be seen in the altogether by a professor. Last time, you weren't here when I woke up the next day."

"Yes, I had a early morning Wizengamot committee meeting the day after your September transformation. Besides, as

I've already said, it's nothing I haven't seen before." For some reason, that sentiment made Remus blush even further. "But permit me to make a concession to your modesty."

With that, Dumbledore waved his wand, and a cloth napkin from the table flew across the room, expanding and changing as it went until it landed at Remus's side in the form of a terrycloth bathrobe. Remus quickly donned the robe before joining Albus at the table. Despite eating most of a deer the night before, he was every bit as hungry as he normally was on the morning after a transformation. It had been speculated that both transformations drew on the body's life energies to an unhealthy degree, thus instilling a ravenous hunger after each. But at that thought, Remus frowned at the memory of *who* had made that speculation to him.

After removing the lid, the werewolf prepared a plate for himself of eggs and fruit while steadfastly ignoring the bacon. Deep inside, the Beast whined petulantly, but Remus ignored it as usual. It had devoured a whole deer the night before without his consent, so it could go hungry for a while.

"So how much do you recall from last night?" Albus asked.

Remus shrugged. "Not much. I remember some periods of activity, but not all. And even for what I do remember, everything felt sluggish, as though I had been drugged. Which, in a sense, I suppose I had been." He looked into Dumbledore's eyes. "How long were you here, Albus?"

"Most of the night," he replied. "Fortuitously, this full moon fell on a Saturday night, so I felt I could stay up and observe events this time. I have nothing pressing for this particular

Sunday, so I'll be returning to Hogwarts soon to get some sleep. I suggest you do likewise."

Remus nodded but then furrowed his brow. "Did we ... talk at some point?"

"We did indeed, after a fashion. Unsurprisingly, you were neither as gregarious nor as erudite as you normally are – the vocal cords and mouth cavity of a werewolf were not meant for human speech – but I could tell that you were you. A bit ill-tempered and surly and with a diminished intellect, but it was unquestionably a sane and perfectly non-violent Remus Lupin whose eyes looked back into my own."

"If you don't mind, I should like to see your memories of that later," Remus said.

"Of course. But later this week after you're fully recovered." Dumbledore looked at him curiously. "The werewolf fell asleep just before dawn, and you transformed soon after. I allowed you to sleep some more, but you seemed to be having a nightmare." He paused. "Was it the same one?"

"Yes," Remus said ruefully. "After all these years, still the exact same dream. Little Remus John Lupin is lost in the woods and terrified when a werewolf howls in the distance and then some beast jumps out of the brambles at me. Then, I wake up. And after these years, I still don't know what it means."

"It is related to the circumstances under which you were bitten, surely."

He shrugged. "I suppose. I just don't understand the context. Fenrir Greyback attacked and bit me while I was asleep in my bedroom at my parents' house. I can't recall

any incidents from my childhood when I was lost in the woods and pursued by a werewolf or any other animal. Also, I don't remember ever having the dream until sometime after I turned 13."

"Perhaps it has some symbolic significance."

"Perhaps," Remus said before digging back into his eggs. "But after all these years, I still have no clue what it could mean."

Dumbledore had no answers either, so he said nothing in reply. Although he did reach over to help himself to the bacon that the vegetarian werewolf had eschewed.

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### ***15 October 1993***

#### ***Divination***

Immediately after taking roll, Professor Trelawney looked up through her coke-bottle glasses and noticed that Lavender Brown was waving her arm excitedly.

"Yes, child?" she inquired.

Lavender stood and moved to where she could see everyone. "Before we start the class, Professor, I have an announcement to make. On the first day of Divination, you warned me that something I was dreading would happen around this time. I didn't know what that might mean, so I asked Hermione Granger. And she was able to interpret the prophecy and warn me that my pet rabbit, Binky, might be in danger. So I took her advice and asked my mother to have a house elf keep a close eye on Binky. *Today at breakfast*, I received a message from her saying that yesterday Binky had gotten out of his cage somehow, but the house elf *rescued him* right as *a fox was closing in!*"

At that, about half the class (including the instructor) gasped in credulous wonderment at the announcement, while the other half was merely bemused by it. Hermione, who had been trying to stifle a yawn since entering the hot stuffy room, suddenly perked up and looked at Lavender through wide eyes.

"And so," Lavender continued, "I just wanted to thank *both of you*. If it hadn't been for the wisdom of not one but *two seers*, poor Binky would have been *eaten*."

With that, Lavender started applauding both Trelawney and Hermione, and everyone soon joined in with varying degrees of enthusiasm. The sound of the clapping was just loud enough to cover up what Hermione muttered through painfully clenched teeth. "*It was the last thing on her bloody list!*"

Professor Trelawney, meanwhile, seemed to be in a state of rapture as she turned towards Hermione. "Oh my child! I *knew* that the Fates had touched you and that your Third Eye was on the cusp of opening! Please, child, have you any more insights for us?"

Every eye turned to Hermione Granger, who blushed under the unexpected attention. Then, for just a second, she narrowed her eyes towards Lavender towards whom she was suddenly feeling ill-disposed. She looked down at the table and addressed the room in a portentous tone.

"I ... I suppose it is proper for me to share my ... my gift. Or whatever. For the last week or so, I've been under a great deal of stress, in part due to lack of sleep."

"Lavender and I have both noticed," said Parvati with condescending sympathy.

"Well the thing is ... I've been having ... *dreams*." She fought down the urge to laugh both at how theatrically she said the last word and also at the reactions it caused among her more credulous classmates.

"What sort of dreams?" Trelawney asked in awe.

"Well," Hermione continued. "The thing of it is ... I don't really remember them very well when I wake up. I just recall this strange sense of ... *doom*."

"Doom?!" Lavender squeaked.

"Yes, Lavender. *Doom* ... for *you*. I'm pretty sure it has something to do with the Hogsmeade weekend that's coming up at the end of the month. I feel very strongly that if you go to Hogsmeade, something ... *dreadful* will happen to you."

The other Gryffindor's eyes widened. "But ... but... it's the first Hogsmeade weekend! I've been waiting two years to go to Hogsmeade! I can't just ..."

"*Dooooooooom*," Hermione said in a commanding spooky voice.

Lavender went pale and swallowed painfully before sitting back down. The effect was even more pronounced on Professor Trelawney. "Oh my heavens! Yes, yes, Miss Brown, I urge you to take Seer Granger's advice to heart! Why, now that she has pointed it out, I too can see clearly the web of misfortune that surrounds you. You *must not* go to Hogsmeade at the end of this month!"

Then, she turned to address the entire class. "Clearly, this has been an eventful and stressful class session for one day, and I want all of you to meditate on what you have seen



here and ponder on how each of you can open your own Third Eye as Seer Granger has. You are all dismissed."

Neville looked at his watch in confusion. "But ... we've only been in class for three minutes..."

"Shhh!" Hermione hissed at him in a fierce whisper. "This means we've got a free period before our next class! Just go with it!"

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**29 October 1993**

***From a letter to Theo No-Name ...***

*My Dearest Theo,*

*I hope this letter finds you well. I know that your first Hogsmeade weekend approaches, and Ted, Nymphadora and I are all looking forward to seeing you so you can tell us all about how your year has been over lunch. However, I would be remiss if I did not warn you of certain disturbing developments. For the past several weeks, offensive graffiti attacking "the Outcast" and demanding that you not return to Hogsmeade.*

*As you know, I was a Black long before I became a Tonks, and while I am no longer a part of that family, I am still Black enough to never bow to intimidation. Not only are you still welcome in our home, but I insist you come visit us this Saturday. We all miss you, especially Nymphadora who has come to view you as something like a "little brother." But I did want you to be aware of what has been happening in our little village so you would not be alarmed if you happened to come across any of this nonsense without forewarning.*

*Until Saturday,*

## *Andromeda Tonks*

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Theo read the letter twice before putting it away. It had come during dinner, but he waited until afterwards to read it. There had been a brief flurry of interest in the question of "who would ever bother sending an owl to *him*?" and he did not wish to draw any further attention from his house-mates. Instead, he waited until he was outside the door of the empty classroom where Mr. Sturgeon (or whatever his name was supposed to be) taught self-defense to a select group of students. He wasn't yet certain that he was gaining any *occult* benefits from Wu Xi Do, but it did seem to help with anxiety a bit. And also with dodging hexes which he had been forced to do twice this week. As he returned the letter to his bag, he noticed Jim and Ron coming up. To his surprise, Hermione was with them.

"Decided to join us in self-defense, Hermione?" he asked with some surprise.

"Sorry, but I don't have enough hours in the day as it is," she answered. "Ron and I have been wanting to talk to you, but you skipped last night's SPAM meeting – I still can't believe we're calling it that – and we haven't had any classes with you today. We were wondering if you'll be visiting the Tonkses this weekend."

Theo thought back to the warning letter he'd just read, and his eyes narrowed slightly. "Why do you ask?"

Hermione nudged Ron who spoke up with some mild embarrassment. "Well, the thing is ... I've been looking into becoming a Healer, but I've never even really met one before other than Madam Pomfrey. Hermione suggested that since there's a medical clinic in Hogsmeade, it might

be a good idea to meet them and find out what the job's actually like. And if maybe they might want someone to help around the place next summer."

"Yes," Hermione said excitedly. "Magical healing sounds fascinating to me as well. I'd love to come along if only to meet the Tonkses. I've heard so much about them!"

Theo nodded somewhat guardedly. "Well, I'll be going over there for lunch on Saturday and will stay a few hours. I don't suppose they'd mind if you came in and introduced yourselves."

"Wonderful! I'm so excited!" Hermione exclaimed. Ron was not quite as openly enthusiastic, but he still seemed pleased.

"I'd love to join you all," said Jim, "but I'll be with my parents and my Uncle Pete most of the day. Maybe some other time?"

Theo nodded, and then Jim and Ron headed into the classroom. Hermione was just about to leave when Theo called out to her.

"So, just between us," Theo asked somewhat suspiciously. "Was it Ron's idea to meet with the Tonkses? Or your's?"

"... what do you mean?" Hermione answered after a brief pause.

"I mean, Ron has known I've been living with them for a while, but he's never expressed any interest in meeting them before now. Meanwhile, you're the one who seems to have taken me on as her '*special project*' for the year. I was wondering if you'd put the idea into his head."

She blushed "Well, I ... I wouldn't say I *put the idea* there. I did mention it as a possibility..."

"Hermione! *I don't need bodyguards* just to get from Hogwarts to the Tonks Clinic!"

"Theo," she replied. "We're not going as ... bodyguards or anything like that. Ron really does want to meet some actual healers. And so do I."

"Uh-huh," Theo answered, still somewhat angry. "Well alright. You can come. But as my friends, not as ... as people who've taken pity on me. I don't want or need that. Which, by the way, is why I'm taking a break from SPAM. I figure if I stay there much longer, you and Anthony will start ... *experimenting* on me or something."

Hermione flinched. "I'm ... sorry you feel that way, Theo. I guess I'll be going now." She turned quickly and fled down the hallway.

Theo looked anguished for a moment and almost called after her. While he was somewhat frustrated by Hermione's over-protectiveness, he knew it was out of kindness and that she didn't deserve for him to hurt her feelings. But she was already gone. Theo closed his eyes, counted to ten, and then went into the classroom, hoping to work out his frustrations by punching imaginary opponents. In his head, they all looked like Tiberius Nott.

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**31 October 1993**  
**Hogsmeade**  
**3:00 a.m.**

After some angry letters from Andromeda Tonks to the DMLE, a night-time security patrol was added to

Hogsmeade, though it consisted of DMLE generally security personnel rather than actual aurors. Their numbers were small though, and after a few nights, the pattern of their patrols was easy to predict. If anyone on the security detail observed a rat scurrying down the edge of the street in the direction of the Tonks Clinic, none of them thought anything of it.

Minutes later, Peter Pettigrew was satisfied that he had plenty of time before the patrol circled back around. With a soft pop, the rat turned back into a man. From his pocket, Peter produced several sheets of parchment covered in runes. Very special runes that he'd been provided years before by very special friends that he'd been saving for a very special occasion. He crept up to the edge of the Tonkses ward line, secured one of the parchments to the ground with a Permanent Sticking Charm, and then cast a Disillusionment Charm to hide it. This was perhaps the most dangerous part of his plan. Pettigrew did not expect any of the locals to see through the concealing spells, but he knew Mad-Eye Moody had taken up residence in Hogsmeade for some reason. If the paranoid auror with the roving magical eye happened to come this way before the *festivities* started and saw the parchments, the whole plan might be put into jeopardy.

Peter set that concern aside as he added three more warding parchments around the clinic at each of the cardinal directions. He was a Gryffindor through and through. Big risks meant big rewards.

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**31 October 1993**

**A small meeting room in the Slytherin dungeons**

**8:15 a.m.**

"Are you ready for this?"

Amy nodded, her calm exterior almost concealing the glimmer of worry in her eyes. Harry gave her a reassuring smile. Greg stood behind her, popping his knuckles nervously and in general completely failing to show the same degree of poise as his adopted little sister. Harry continued.

"I'll be leaving for Hogsmeade just after breakfast. Blaise and I will be in the Three Broomsticks by eleven o'clock and remain there through your meeting. Greg will bring you to Hogsmeade at quarter to noon. You will meet the Goyles and Nott in the common area of the Three Broomsticks and then retire to a private dining room upstairs. I will remain below and wait until you come out again."

She nodded again, and he put his hand on her shoulder reassuringly.

"Remember, Amy. Based on everything we know, *nothing* is going to happen up there. Nott just wants to meet with you. Under British wizarding marriage laws, the two of you must meet face to face at least three times in the year before the marriage, and this is just number one. And each meeting has to be chaperoned."

She flinched at that, and Harry knew why. The "chaperones" would be Mr. and Mrs. Goyle, which under the circumstances might be worse than no chaperone at all. Still, his assessment seemed accurate. There was no reason to think that Nott wanted anything more out of this meeting than to tick off one of the legal requirements for a wizarding marriage contract involving an Ancient and Noble family.

"*But* – if anything happens that is unexpected or frightens you, shoot off some fireworks and I'll be there as soon as I can." Harry squeezed her shoulder. "I know this is frightening for you." He looked up into Greg's eyes. "For *both* of you. But we will all get through this if we face our fears without giving in to them. Just for today – find your inner Gryffindor."

Amy actually laughed at that, though Greg still looked vaguely nauseous.

"And you're *sure* you can stop the wedding?" he asked nervously.

"Yes," Harry said simply. "But I've got to do it when the time is right." He smiled confidently. "And when I do, it will *amaze* you how easy it was."

Whether he truly was as confident as he sounded or was just faking it, Harry's words had the desired effect. Well, mostly.

"Just to be clear though," Greg said. "If you *don't* get Amy out of this, at a *minimum*, I'm gonna punch you in the face *really hard*."

Harry was unfazed. "Well of course! That goes without saying."

At nine o'clock, students began passing through the main doors of Hogwarts while Caretaker Sturgeon dutifully took down their names and reminded them to return by 6:00 p.m. or they would receive detention for tardiness. The Third Years were the last to leave and were escorted en masse by several prefects who had been assigned to show them around the small village for the first hour before letting them loose to explore on their own. The group made

their collective way down the long pathway from the school to the village. The day was unseasonably cold and gloomy, and despite their best efforts to ignore it, a few of them couldn't help looking over to the cloud of dementors that hung over the Forbidden Forest.

Once in Hogsmeade, the prefects began pointing out various features of interest. Harry had already seen everything worth seeing under Mad-Eye Moody's guidance and so was rather bored by the tour, but he was pleased to note the presence of several aurors all over town as added security for the day. Unfortunately for the prefects, all order soon broke down when the tour carried them past Quality Quidditch Supplies. A sign hanging from the top of the building proudly announced the arrival of a sample broom from the recently established Firebolt Company, specifically the prototype '*Firebolt Seeker*' that had been custom-ordered by the Bulgarian National Team for use by their latest recruit, international Quidditch phenom Victor Krum. A life-sized cutout of the 16-year-old Krum stood in the window next to special broom, only eight of which had been produced so far. The price tag left even Harry shocked.

"How can a Firebolt possibly cost that much more than a Nimbus 2001?" he asked the store manager incredulously.

"Well, it's got that new Redistributed Gravity Charm, you see!" the salesman replied jovially. "It's a new Charm what the company founder Randolph Spudmore's come up with. 'E's got a patent on it, so no other broom company can use it even if'n they figure it out themselves!"

"Redistributed ... Gravity ... Charm?" Harry asked cautiously. "What does that do?"



"Well, ya'see, gravity is what makes things want to fall to the ground when ya drops 'em. It's somethin' Muggles come up with."

"Yes," the boy interrupted in annoyance. "I'm *aware* of gravity, thank you."

"Hmmf," said the salesman, miffed at the interruption. "Well then, I reckon you know that a normal broom has to fight against gravity while in flight, especially while acceleratin'. But not the Firebolt, though! While the Redistributed Gravity Charm is active, '*down*' always refers ta wherever the broomstick is pointed. No drag on acceleration a'tall. It'll make pulling off a Wronsky Feint as easy as pulling up on the stick."

Harry's eyebrows shot up. If the salesman was explaining the Charm properly, then the Firebolt Company would have the edge over every other broom company in Europe for years to come. He made a mental note to send an owl to Artie to find out if he was invested in Firebolt Co. ... or any of its competitors. While most of his peers were content to simply ogle the new broom, Harry spent the next fifteen minutes talking with the salesman about its specifications.

Later, around 11:00, Harry's group split up, with Harry and his brother making their way to the Three Broomsticks for an early lunch with the Potters. Since school had begun, Harry had "enjoyed" three luncheons with Lily, Jim, and Snape on school grounds. That is to say, he'd spent three periods with his mother and brother that were only mildly excruciating as he made casual small talk about his schoolwork without mentioning anything he considered overly personal (or worse, illegal) all while ignoring the grinding of Snape's teeth. Today, however, James would be joining the group for the school's first Hogsmeade

weekend. And, Harry supposed, so that the Chief Auror could be seen overseeing security and boosting morale.

In a way, James's presence was convenient, as it gave Snape an excuse to leave Hogwarts and Hogmeade entirely, thus giving him cover for his secret journey to Longbottom Manor for another round of interrogating the LeStranges. Unfortunately, both Artie and Hestia were unable to make it today, but luckily, they were able to retain the services of a chaperone for Harry whose qualifications James could not deny.

"Good morning, Mr. Moody," Harry said warmly to his tutor whose intimidating presence today also allowed him to meet with his parents without causing any legal complications.

"Potter," Mad-Eye Moody said gruffly. "Or *Potters*, I guess I should say." While Harry was quite familiar with Moody (almost on a first name basis, in fact), Jim had never formally met the legendary ex-auror before and was suitably awestruck. Lily was polite and inviting, but James was visibly uncomfortable with his former mentor's presence. A few minutes later, the Three Broomsticks' fireplace flared up, and last two lunch guests stepped through. One, to Harry's surprise, was Minister Fudge. The other was not a surprise, but neither was it pleasing to him.

"Good afternoon all!" Peter Pettigrew said cheerfully. "I hope I haven't missed any excitement." He grinned at the Potters and Moody. Neither Mad-Eye nor Harry smiled back.

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**A second-story storage room  
atop Ceridwen's Cauldron Shop (across the street**

**from the Tonks Clinic)**  
**11:45 a.m.**

"There's the Outcast," muttered Scabior. "And he ain't alone."

Scabior and the men with him were waiting for Fenrir to transmit the order to commence the attack. They were all antsy at this point. Scabior, like several of his gang, were former short-term Azkaban inmates. They weren't good at taking orders in the best of times, even from someone as intimidating as Fenrir Greyback, and while none of them admitted it, the thought of that many Dementors barely a mile a way was terrifying. But they'd been hired by Sirius Black himself (or so they thought), and he was someone they feared ever more than Greyback.

"Who's that with him?" asked Janos, the one Greyback had sent to lead the attack. Scabior nearly sneered at the werewolf but caught himself. However loathsome werewolves might be in his eyes, only a fool insulted one to his face.

Scabior shrugged instead. "Two dumb kids who chose the wrong boy to make friends with," he said as, down below, Theo No-Name knocked on the door to the Tonks Clinic, Ron and Hermione at his side. All of them were oblivious to the hidden curse wards that they unwittingly walked past on their way into the building.

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***The Leaky Cauldron***  
**11:58 a.m.**

Lunch with the Potters was surprisingly not horrible, even with Pettigrew on hand. While Harry still disliked the man intensely (and with good reason), he grudgingly came to

hold a certain respect for his self-discipline and skill at misdirection. As the boy's Legilimency skills had grown from intuitive leaps into deliberate analyses, Harry had gotten quite good at reading people. And yet, had he not already known that the man was a Death Eater, he'd have never guessed it from their casual conversation. Finally, after half an hour, Harry figured out the trick.

*"He makes a point of trying to act charming and likeable and deliberately failing," Harry realized. "And because he fails to be charming and likeable, people think they see through him and find Lord Potter's ruthless fixer behind the false image. And they never guess that the ruthless fixer is just another false image to hide the back-stabbing Death Eater that represents his true self."*

It reminded Harry of his recent conversation with Snape about using Occlumency to establish separate personalities that could work in tandem, and to his surprise, Harry deduced that Peter must be an Occlumens himself. That realization, along with his disappointment with how under-seasoned Madam Rosmerta's famous Shepherd's Pie was were his two biggest takeaways of the luncheon.

For his part, Fudge wasn't nearly as unctuous as Harry had expected. The Minister had been polite to him – as befitted the Potter Heir – and had at least feigned interest in Harry at least as much as in the Boy-Who-Lived. Indeed, Harry was mildly impressed that Fudge seemed to know the first name of nearly every adult witch and wizard in the Three Broomsticks. Nevertheless, it was obvious that Jim was the real reason for his presence. No less than four reporters had shown up to document the Boy-Who-Lived's first Hogsmeade Weekend (which Harry thought was ridiculous overkill for such a minor occasion), and several pictures were taken of the Minister, the Chief Auror, and the Chosen

One all standing together and smiling insincerely. Moody plainly found the whole scene distasteful, but Harry was surprised at the look of smoldering anger Lily continually directed towards both James and Minister Fudge when no one else's attention was on her.

Just before noon, the group finished their meal, with Minister Fudge magnanimously paying for it all before heading back to London via floo. The Potters, Jim, and Pettigrew rose for a walk around Hogsmeade, but Harry and Moody begged off with Harry explaining that he was waiting for some friends who hadn't arrived yet. As the first group left the inn, Peter stopped on the porch and knelt down to tie his shoe. He did not look up to see if the man hidden under a Disillusionment Charm in the alley across the street saw his signal. He'd known the man for years, after all, and so Peter had complete faith in Fenrir Greyback's professionalism.

Seconds later, the signal had been passed to Scabior and Janos on the other side of town. Janos pulled a small case out of his pocket and opened it. Inside were two vials, one containing a foul-looking potion and the other a single black hair. He carefully dropped the hair into the potion, and after it changed color, he threw his head back and downed it in a single gulp. As the Polyjuice Potion took effect, Janos smiled cruelly. Their employer wanted a big distraction.

You could hardly get more distracting than Sirius Black himself leading an attack on Hogsmeade.

# Hogsmeade pt 2

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### **CHAPTER 20: Chaos in Hogsmeade (pt 1)**

***December 23, 1971 (almost 23 years before)  
Chevenoir (The Black Manor House)  
The Private Study of Lord Arcturus Black  
8:37 p.m.***

Arcturus Black took another sip of port while listening to the gentle scratching of a quill against parchment and trying not to think too much about how Sirius's hand shook as the boy wrote. He had revealed the existence of the Anathema Codex to his grandson and Heir a week before and then set about instructing Sirius as to the spells, rituals, and other abominations within the book via the same teaching technique his own father had employed so many decades before: intense immersion. He'd spent every day over the last week reviewing one Codex entry after another with the boy, addressing both each entry's dark nature and the identification sigils that would let any properly instructed son of an Ancient and Noble House recognize a Codex manifestation and respond appropriately. So as not to overly frighten the child, Arcturus began with the spells which were merely included because they were deemed too impossible to safely control before moving on to those which intentionally invoked catastrophe and horror. Regrettably, he had exhausted the "easy" Codex entries and was now forced to move on to the stuff of nightmares.

As part of the training process, Arcturus required Sirius to copy each identification sigil a minimum of 100 times before moving on to the next entry to ensure that the relevant information would be permanently etched into the boy's mind, locked away from even the most attentive Legilimens but still a part of him forever. If the portentousness of the lessons was not enough, the very special quill that Sirius was presently using would be more than enough to make sure the message sank in.

"I'm finished with this one, Grandfather," Sirius said quietly. Arcturus summoned the parchment from his hand, reviewed it for a moment, and then cast it into the nearby fire.

"Good," he said. "Now, we move on to the final entry for this evening's consideration."

At a flick of Arcturus's wand, the pages of the Black copy of the Anathema Codes flipped rapidly. "This entry is somewhat unusual compared to those you have studied so far, Sirius, though of course everything in the Codex is unusual in some way. This particular entry is peculiar because it is not a spell, nor a ritual, nor a potion, nor a procedure for breeding unnatural beasts. It is naught but a single rune."

With another flick of the wand, a ghostly mist floated up from the book before stabilizing into the shape of a strange runic mark. Sirius frowned. Although he was only one term into his Hogwarts education, he was a clever child and was certainly aware of what conventional runes looked like. As he scrunched up his eyes to focus them, he thought the rune looked like a basic pentagram within a circle rotated slightly but with additional lines and arcs overlaid upon the pentagram at odd angles. Then, he looked away and

shook his head to clear it. For some reason, the image hurt his eyes if he studied it for too long.

"This rune is of no recorded language known to magical or Muggle history. It is apparently meaningless ... at least to humans. The Codex does not name it - wisely, I suspect - but simply identifies it with a sobriquet: The Rune of Singular Hate. The authors hypothesized that it represents some concept incomprehensible to us that is understood by beings from the deepest parts of the Wild. By Those-Who-Wait-In-Darkness."

Sirius shuddered deeply at the cryptic reference to the strange and mythic beings believed to dwell beyond the confines of the universe itself. Arcturus continued.

"According to the Codex, the Rune has the strange and curious power to insinuate itself into other nearby rune schemes, altering their natures in unwholesome ways. Carve the rune onto a broom, and it will change the properties of that broom's enchantments. Draw it on a parchment near the ward line of a house, and it will alter the functioning of those wards and likely the character of the building they protect. In so doing, the Rune functions in a manner similar to Sowilo, but where that common Futhark rune simply invokes the raw magical power, the Rune of Singular Hate generates an even greater magical force somehow drawn from the uncontrollable frenzied anger triggered among those nearby as a side effect of the Rune's activation. This rage-state is pervasive and contagious, and its power and range grow the longer the effect lasts. The more people affected, the more powerful and sophisticated the spell the Rune can fuel. In many cases, using the Rune can inflict permanent homicidal madness among those affected. Once activated, the rage-state can only be ended by the total destruction of the



corrupted ward scheme, usually through the annihilation of whatever item or place was corrupted. Legends say that in ancient times entire cities were once burned to the ground as a result of the madness engendered by a Rune that was left to grow and fester unchecked."

Sirius frowned. "Who would make use of such a thing?"

Arcturus shrugged. "Who would be mad enough to use any of these things, boy! We among the Ancient and Noble Houses suppress such magics for a reason, after all. As for the Rune of Singular Hate, there are reasons for one to use it if he is desperate enough or ruthless enough or simply deranged enough. Rune schemes that incorporate this alien sigil are more powerful, and the resulting enchantments can be more versatile and useful, though by their very nature they are soon to self-destruct."

"There are two significant limitations on the Rune of Singular Hate. First, the magical effect powered by the Rune must have some punitive quality. The crafter of the Runes must identify a target likely to come into contact with the enchanted object or warded location, ideally one who is already subject to intense hatred. The crafter can target someone he personally despises or someone who means nothing to him but who has drawn the enmity of others if his ultimate goal is something other than mere revenge. When the Rune is triggered, the target must be close enough to the corrupted rune matrix to attract its attention, in which case, the Rune's magic will attempt to kill the target and anyone nearby while drawing more and more power from the raging mob unleashed by the Rune's activation. The caster can attempt to shape the manner of his victim's demise to his whims or simply let the magic run wild and allow Fate to dictate the manner of the victim's ending."

Arcturus smiled grimly. "Naturally, if the true goal was to create a raging mob, the crafter can simply target someone socially unpopular with a spell designed to drag out his death as long as possible so that more and more people fall under the Rune's sway."

Sirius was suitably horrified by the description. "That seems ... overly complicated," he finally said.

"You may think so," Arcturus said. "But it is said that Herpo the Foul unleashed the Rune of Singular Hate in the ancient city of Carthage, and before his work was done, the Romans burned the great city to the ground and salted the earth so that nothing would ever grow there again."

The old man barked out a laugh. "Of course, many things are said about Herpo the Foul, most of them absurdist nonsense. But it is clear from the Codex that a clever and ruthless Dark Lord could use the Rune to lay waste to a large enough area and also drive a sizeable population to madness if he hides the object that carries the curse where it cannot be found easily and then arranges to drag out the death of the selected target as long as possible."

Sirius nodded slowly. "And the second limitation?"

"Activating the Rune results in the swift and agonizing death of the one responsible for such activation."

That caught the boy by surprise. "Wait, why would anyone, even Herpo the Foul, use the Rune of Singular Hate if doing so was suicidal?!"

Arcturus laughed again. "Think it through, Sirius. I said the one who activates the Rune, not the one who crafted it and inserted it into the targeted matrix! If you're not inclined to die for your cause, all you need do is find someone stupid

enough to die in your place!" The old man sniffed disdainfully. "It's usually not that hard."

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**31 October 1993**  
**11:55 a.m.**

As Janos (now polyjuiced to resemble a young Sirius Black) and the other men filtered out of the room to prepare for their part of the attack, Scabior looked out the window to study the Tonks Clinic once more. Despite his best efforts, he could not see the cursed runes that the real Black and his allies had attached to the boundaries of the Clinic's wards. He shrugged to himself and pulled off his shirt to expose the rune that Fenrir Greyback had painted on his chest earlier that morning. The werewolf had assured Scabior that his part in today's exercise was essential the operation's success. When he heard the signal (and from what Greyback had said, the signal would be unmistakable), Scabior would read the incantation on the scrap of paper waiting in his pocket that would trigger the cursed runes and start the next phase of the operation. Fenrir also assured Scabior that he was being entrusted with this important role because of the wizards who'd volunteered for Sirius Black's scheme, the werewolf could tell that Scabior was easily the most powerful and most cunning.

*"Honestly, Scabior," Greyback had said, "your participation is essential to our plan."*

Scabior smiled. Finally, after years of struggling to survive in Knockturn Alley, he would get what he truly deserved.

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Meanwhile, with a few soft pops, "Sirius Black" and the men who accompanied him apparated onto the roof of Tomes

and Scrolls, a local bookstore across the street from the Hogsmeade Post Office. There, private citizens could rent owls for one-time mail deliveries, but the building had a far more important purpose than that. Since the Ministry of Magic came into being, the Post Office had also served as the primary admin facility for Ministry operations within the village. Among the other small offices inside the building was the Hogsmeade branch of the Department of Magical Transportation.

There were two permanent floo access points in Hogsmeade. One was at the Tonks Clinic which needed 24-hour access to St. Mungo's. The other was in the Three Broomsticks, which the Ministry had selected as the primary floo access portal to the village. As "Sirius" knew full well, both of those dedicated floo portals were about to be put out of commission. Every other floo-capable fireplace in Hogsmeade had its connection regulated out of the DoMT office in the building below, which meant that taking the Post Office down would cut the entire village off from floo travel. It wouldn't keep the Ministry from responding, but it would slow them down quite a bit.

"Sirius" called out to his men and directed them to let loose with their most destructive curses on his mark. Then, he pointed his wand at the Post Office and sneered, his eyes dancing at the thought of the chaos he was about to unleash.

**"BOMBARDA!"**

The sound of the explosion resulting from a half-dozen Blasting Curses echoed across the village, as the Hogsmeade Post Office blew sky-high, and every fireplace in town instantly lost its connection to the Floo Network.

Every fireplace but two. "Sirius" grinned and held his wand aloft to unleash a second spell.

**"MORSMODRE!"**

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### ***The Tonks Clinic***

***11:45 a.m. (Fifteen minutes earlier)***

"Hello all!" Ted Tonks exclaimed brightly. "Welcome to the Tonks Clinic. Please, call me Ted."

The Healer opened the door wide and welcomed Theo and his two companions inside. "Now, you must be Hermione and you must be Ron ... unless naming conventions have changed drastically when I wasn't looking. Anyway, Theo has told me all about you!"

"I have?" Theo said in surprise. "I think I just gave their names and the fact that they were both Gryffindors interested in healing."

"Yes, yes. Well what else is there to know that we won't learn over lunch together? Mind you, lunch will be a bit late, I'm afraid. Andromeda is out on a house call, and she took Iris with her, and Dora is pestering some of the aurors who are on security duty today. And I'm quite hopeless in the kitchen, so unless you're fine with just a ham sandwich, we'll have to wait for them."

"That's fine, Ted," Theo said. "I think we're all too jumped up on Honeyduke's chocolate to be very hungry. Perhaps we could sit in the parlor while we wait for Andi and Iris to come back. I know Hermione and Ron have a lot of questions about magical healing."

If the subtext was that he wanted Ron and Hermione to ask their questions and then leave rather than just shadow him the whole day, neither of them seemed to pick up on it. The four of them sat in Ted's cozy parlor in front of the unlit fireplace, and Ted patiently answered Ron and Hermione's (but mainly Ron's) questions about the profession of magical healing. What classes should he take? How hard are they? How hard is it to get a Healing apprenticeship if your family isn't "politically connected"? Did the Tonkses need any summer help? Hermione had fewer questions, but she did ask at one point if Ted was familiar with a condition called Mordenkainen's Disjunction. Ron shot a dirty look in her direction, while Theo suppressed a smile.

*"Heh. I guess I'm not the only one she does that to,"* he thought.

For his part, Ted was intrigued by the question. Apparently, it was a rare condition among wizards, even more so than conventional dyslexia was among Muggles – he was quick to point out that the condition was not simply "wizarding dyslexia" – and he personally had never treated a case. But he had researched it during his apprenticeship, and he considered it not so much a learning disability as simply a different way of learning, one that made it harder to study and master spells, but it was also thought to grant other benefits such as superior spatial reasoning skills and better memory recall even without developing Occlumency skills. While there was no "cure" as such, the negative aspects of Mordenkainen's Disjunction (such as difficulty at learning wand movements and in reading comprehension) could be ameliorated by Charms that could alter written text to make it more legible or, if necessary, cause the text to read itself aloud. Ron was just about to ask for the names of those Charms when it happened.

**BOOOM!**

The explosion was quite near, close enough to make the windows of the Tonks Clinic shake and rattle. "What the hell was that?!" Ted muttered in surprise.

Across the street, Scabior pulled out the parchment he'd been given. If *that* wasn't the signal, he couldn't imagine what would be. He grinned once more as he studied the incantation. He didn't really know what the Latin words meant, let alone what it would do, but he was sure he could pronounce the incantation well enough for the Death Eaters' needs. "*Finally*," he thought. "*After today, everyone's gonna know my name.*"

**"*PER VITA MEA, PERFLUAT ODIUM!*"**

As the last word left his lips, there was a flash of light from the ward line of the Tonks Clinic which seemed to put forth a heat-haze that quickly surrounded the building. Then, a massive floating ethereal rune manifested on each side of the house at the cardinal directions. A strange rune, like a pentagram but not, and one that perfectly matched the one inscribed on Scabior's chest in a mixture of ink and blood provided by that creepy man who had accompanied Greyback to their private meeting earlier this morning.

Suddenly, Scabior felt that something was wrong. There was a sharp burning sensation on his chest as the rune there began to glow. And then caught fire! Scabior screamed in pain and surprise and started prying to pat the fires out with his hands. If anything that made it worse, for the green fire that had engulfed his chest also stuck to his hands, causing them to ignite as well. He dropped to the ground and began to roll about in agony. Strangely, the green fire did not ignite anything else in the room, but

neither did rolling on the floor do anything to smother the flames.

In the end, Scabior was denied his wish. His body would writhe in agony for another thirty seconds before expiring. By then, the skin on most of his body was completely blackened. Within another two minutes, his corpse would be the color and consistency of spent charcoal, naught but a grainy ashy powder lying on the floor in a vaguely humanoid shape. No one would remember Scabior's name ... because there simply wouldn't be enough of him left to identify his remains.

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Meanwhile, in the clinic, Ted swiftly headed towards the door but paused in surprise while on the way.

"What is it?" Hermione asked nervously.

"I don't know," he answered. "Something with the wards." He shook his head and continued to the front door. But as soon as he grasped the door handle, the wizard screamed in shock and pain. He staggered back, his right hand covered in terrible burns. And the door handle that had burned him was now covered in a corona of sickly green flame so hot that the brass handle had already started to melt. Then, to the children's horror, blackened letters suddenly started to appear on the door itself as if burned into the wood by some invisible flame. Letters that spelled out a single word that Theo No-Name had already learned to hate.

## ***OUTCAST!***

Outside the Tonks Clinic, those wizards and witches in the street who were still wondering about the source of the explosion they'd just heard now stared in wonderment and



fear at the clinic which was now wreathed in a strange heat-haze and surrounded on all four sides by eerie sigils floating in the air, sigils almost as big as the house itself. Within a few seconds though, those expressions of wonderment and fear soon changed to dazed looks ... followed by increasingly angry glares.

Auror Gawain Robards, who was in town as part of the Ministry security detachment was the first on the scene. He'd been on his way towards the site of the explosion that had rocked the town just seconds earlier when he'd noticed the unusual phenomenon at the Tonks Clinic. There was a small crowd in front of the clinic, but it seemed to be growing. In the distance, he could hear someone with a magically amplified voice shouting out orders of some kind, but he was too distracted for the words to immediately register.

"What's going on here?" he exclaimed aloud.

"It's the Outcast," one of the townspeople said in an odd strangled voice. "He's to blame!"

"Eh? What are you talking about?" Robards was confused. He knew about Theo No-Name, of course. Every auror assigned to Hogsmeade during today's student outing had been briefed on the Outcast's unfortunate situation, which was one of many things that Chief Potter thought might cause a disturbance of some kind. But the auror couldn't imagine what a Hogwarts Third Year, even the son of a suspected Death Eater, might have to do with either the explosion (which had actually been some distance away, near the Post Office, Robards thought) or the same pyrotechnic display now before him.

"Outcast!" said another nearby villager. "Outcast! Outcast!"

Robards looked around nervously as the angry refrain was picked up by more and more villagers. He held up his wand and shot off some fireworks in an effort to gain everyone's attention before a riot broke out, never realizing that it was already too late for that.

"Alright now! Everyone just settle down and go back to your ... *OOF!*" The auror's instructions were cut off as an elderly but surprisingly spry witch jumped onto his back and began trying to claw his eyes out with her bare hands.

"OUTCAST! OUTCAST!"

Robards managed to throw the witch off, but by then, there were dozens of people chanting the word "Outcast" with a terrifying intensity. Not everyone nearby seemed to be affected, but those that were immediately turned on those who were not. He managed to stun three villagers before he was knocked to the ground, his wand sent flying. Then, the maddened villagers dogpiled him, punching and kicking him as they went.

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### ***The Three Broomsticks*** ***11:57 a.m.***

As the rest of his semi-estranged family departed the Three Broomsticks along with Pettigrew, Harry let out a long slow breath of relief. He'd realized during the earlier luncheon that Pettigrew was an Occlumens, but it was unknown if he had any Legilimency skills. Harry thought it unlikely but better safe than sorry. Accordingly, he'd spent the past hour carefully modulating his emotions so that (a) none of the Potters knew how much he disliked Pettigrew and (b) Pettigrew himself knew exactly how much Harry liked him, but (c) Pettigrew would not know the true reason for

Harry's disdain. Aside from making the luncheon unduly stressful for the boy, it had also given him a mild headache, but with his status as Seneschal to House Potter and "best friend" to the Chief Auror, Peter Pettigrew was perhaps one of the most influential and dangerous Death Eaters in the country. If the man even suspected that Harry knew his true allegiance, the results could be fatal.

"Well, Potter," said Mad-Eye Moody after tipping back and draining the last of his (not-butter) beer, "not that I haven't enjoyed this free meal on the Minister's coin, but when you asked me to be your chaperone, you said you wanted me to stick around afterwards for some reason you couldn't discuss in an owl post."

Harry looked around. "How good are your privacy charms?"

Moody crooked his one good eyebrow and then pulled out his wand. A short incantation later, he answered the question. "Impeccable. So what's going on?"

Swiftly, Harry outlined the situation between Amy Wilkes and Tiberius Nott before asking if Moody would mind using his magic eye to spy on the meeting that was about to take place upstairs. The ex-auror frowned disapprovingly.

"Potter, I know I've probably given you the impression that I'm a bit of a rule-breaker when I need to be, but there are laws against using magic to spy on confidential meetings, even meetings of accused former Death Eaters. I can't just ..."

Before he could say anything more, the door to inn opened, and a group of wizards entered: Tiberius Nott, the Goyle family, and Amaryllis Wilkes. Nott noticed Harry and Moody and simply sneered contemptuously at them, while young Amy nodded in Harry's direction and did her best to show

no emotion. The group headed up the stairs to the meeting room that Madam Rosmerta had reserved for them without any further consideration of Harry, Moody or anyone else. Moody growled softly.

"Well, maybe just this once," he muttered, and his magical eye swivelled around in its socket to look straight up. "Mind you, I may be able to see them, but it's at a bad angle for observation unless I wanted to peer up Madam Goyle's skirts. Also, I won't be able to hear anything. Are you expecting Nott to try to hurt the girl?"

"No," Harry said before amending his answer. "At least, not today. I think the hurting part won't start until after the marriage ceremony."

Moody's distaste was obvious. "And when's the 'happy occasion'?"

"Sometime next June, I think."

"Uh-huh. So far, they're just talking and eating. And for what it's worth, Nott's table manners are atrocious." Moody's eye refocused on Harry for a second and then whirled around in its socket to study the Common Room. "We're a bit obvious here, Potter. Let's take a walk. I can probably keep a better eye on your little friend with some distance instead of right under her. Plus, it'll give us a chance to talk shop. You still coming in for a lesson this afternoon?"

"Assuming nothing changes," Harry said as he and the ex-auror stood.

"Mm-hmm. Any progress on your wandless exercises?"

"Nope," the boy answered with some annoyance.

Moody laughed. "Well talk about some strategies that might help during your lesson."

"Like what?"

"Well," Moody said diplomatically, "theoretically, if you were an Occlumens at level three or higher, you could open up a secondary thought-stream that would spend all its time constantly remembering all your prior summoning attempts. That might speed up the process a bit. Mind you, there are some pitfalls you'll need to be wary of with that approach. Or that you *would* be need to wary of, if you ever became an Occlumens. Hypothetically, I mean."

"Well, honestly, Mr. Moody," Harry drawled as if bored, "how likely is it for a thirteen-year-old to learn Occlumency at all, let alone reach that level? Pretty improbable, isn't it?"

They both chuckled as they exited the bar and made their way down the street. The whole time, Moody's magic eye remained fixed on the meeting room where Nott and Amy appeared to be in polite discussion over their main course. All around the two, students from Hogwarts milled about the streets of Hogsmeade, enjoying the sunny day. Quality Quidditch Supply still had a mob of students practically drooling over the Firebolt prototype. Zonko's had its usual hyperactive crowd. As they moved further down the street, Harry glanced in the window of Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop and was surprised to see Emily Rossum (who was supposed to be at the Auror Academy) and Marcus Flint(!), the latter of whom seemed profoundly uncomfortable to be seen in the notoriously frilly establishment. Harry resisted the temptation to pop in to say hi ... and see if he could somehow make Flint blush even harder. Instead, he inquired about Amy once more, and Moody reassured him that everything still seemed fine.

"All in all," Harry thought, "this has turned out to be a surprisingly nice day."

Naturally, that thought was immediately followed by the sound of the first explosion of the afternoon - followed swiftly by the first appearance of the Dark Mark in the skies above Britain in more than a decade.

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***12:03 p.m.***  
***The Potters***

After leaving the Three Broomsticks, Jim and his parents made their way down the streets of Hogsmeade, with Peter Pettigrew close behind. Jim looked unusually pensive, and Lily noticed and asked him what was wrong. The boy looked back and forth between the three grown-ups he cared about the most.

"There's ... something I had wanted to talk to you about. But ... I didn't want to get into it in front of Mr. Moody or the Minister."

James looked at the boy curiously. "What is it, son?"

Jim looked around. For once, he was out and about without a throng of admirers. The news reporters had apparently gotten their fill of him for once, and while it was a bit of a wonder in Hogsmeade for the Boy-Who-Lived to finally visit, the town was also overwhelmed by the rest of the visiting students.

"When I'm near Dementors ... I ... I hear things," he said quietly. The three adults looked at each other in confusion and worry.

"What sort of ... things, sport?" Peter asked cautiously.

Jim took a deep breath and then waved away a tiny beetle that had almost flown into his mouth. "I think it's ... that night."

"Which night?" James asked, although he feared he knew. Without even asking, Peter pulled out his wand and set up a privacy ward.

"*That* night. Halloween 1981. I hear the sound of a woman screaming. And then a man with a real scary high-pitched voice laughing. And then ... I remember a flash of green." He looked up at his mother and father nervously. "I've never asked you what happened the night You-Know-Who showed up at our house. But ... is that it? Am I remembering his attack?"

All three of the adults looked suitably horrified by that possibility. Finally, James let out a sigh.

"I don't know, Jim. You might well be. Dementors do force you to relieve your worst memories, though I've never heard of one forcing you to relive something from infancy. Your mother and I will tell you what we can but ..."

"Honestly, Jim," Lily continued. "Neither of us remember much. Whatever curse You-Know-Who used on us both was some kind of incredibly powerful stunner. It took the healers hours to come up with a counter-curse that would wake us up, and when we did wake up, our memories of the night were jumbled up badly."

James nodded his agreement. "I remember the wards tripping when he crossed them. And I remember telling Lily to run for the nursery. It was on the second floor, but there was a window in that room and we kept a broom in there, just in case. I ... think I remember seeing his face and him pointing his wand at me, but everything else is just a blur."

Lily nodded sadly. "And I remember running up the stairs to the nursery, but I only had a few seconds before he followed me. I know I heard spellfire and the sound of James getting knocked out. I think I may have heard him laughing as well. Before I could do anything, the door burst open and ... that's the last thing I recall, I'm afraid. I'm sure I screamed as well. Anyone would under those circumstances."

Peter patted the boy on the shoulder. "Jim, it's ... amazing that you should be able to remember all that. And also ... horrible that it should come to you from being around those foul Dementors. I know this must be traumatic for you, but just remember - that's all in the past. Try not to think about You-Know-Who. He can't hurt you here."

***BOOOM!***

As the explosion echoed through the town, Lily gasped and pointed. Rising up over Hogsmeade from the far side of town was the unmistakable sight of the Dark Mark.

"My god!" Lily exclaimed in horror. James looked around wildly as he drew his wand. From somewhere nearby, they all heard Mad-Eye Moody's voice call out an amplified warning.

"Lily start getting students back to the school," James said. "That means you too, Jim."

Jim shook his head. "I want to stay, Dad! I can help!"

James looked deeply into his son's eyes as if to gauge his intent. "Peter?" he said without breaking eye contact with Jim.

"On it," Pettigrew said as he tightly gripped the boy's shoulders.



"What?!" Jim exclaimed. "No...!" But before he could react, Peter side-apparated the boy away to safety. James turned to Lily.

"They're off to Peter's office. From there, Peter will send Jim back to Albus's office via floo."

Lily nodded. Then, in a sudden move, she stepped forward and kissed James on the lips before pulling back with her hand still on his cheek. "I'm going to find Harry. Go to work. And remember – be brave, not stupid!"

He smirked. "Yes, ma'am!" Then, he darted off in the direction of the explosion, while Lily ran back towards the Three Broomsticks, herding students back towards Hogwarts as she went. She made it back to Madam Rosmerta's in time to see Harry's departure ... and scream at the sight of his pursuers.

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***12:05 p.m.***

### ***The Gates of Hogwarts***

Malachi Sturgeon had spent the better part of three hours standing by the doors to the Great Hall checking the names of Hogwarts students as they left for Hogsmeade and returned. Well, mostly standing. After two hours, when no one was looking, he transfigured a nearby rock into a chair to sit in. Idly, he thought back on his own school days spent here under a different name and wondered if Old Filch had also been required to waste the better part of a day at this same post, keeping up with departures and returns without even the comfort of a transfigured chair. He had a momentary stab of sympathy for his squib predecessor that lasted until he inevitably remembered some of the man's crueller detentions and felt such feelings wash away.

It was warm for this time of year, and the doors of the castle were wide open with several students coming out to look around on their way to lunch. Among them was young Lavender Brown who had strangely taken a shine to the Hogwarts Caretaker. In truth, Remus Lupin had grown bored of his snarling "Argus Filch" impression, and so the demeanor of Malachi Sturgeon had relaxed a bit. In fact, it had apparently relaxed enough for some of the female students to notice that he was surprisingly muscular beneath his shabby clothing and that his beard made him seem more rugged and dashing than he had ever intended (which is to say that he had never intended to seem rugged or dashing at all).

Also outside on the front steps of the school was a Second Year Gryffindor named Luna Lovegood who seemed to be nibbling nervously on a dinner roll she'd brought out from the Great Hall. The girl had been sitting there ever since her friend Amy Wilkes had left about thirty minutes prior in the company of her house-mate Gregory Goyle. Remus turned to Lavender.

"Not going to Hogsmeade?" he asked, still with a bit of gruffness, though the girl did not seem to mind. Lavender shook her head.

"I was warned not to by a seer," she replied with visible disappointment. "And I'd been so looking forward to it."

Remus frowned. In his youth, he'd been one of Minerva McGonagall's favorite students, and he long ago picked up on and adopted his mentor's disdain for the art of Divination. But before he could respond, the Lovegood girl spoke up.

"A seer?" she asked somewhat dubiously. "Do you mean Hermione?"

"Yeah, it was Hermione who warned me." Lavender noticed Luna's expression. "You don't believe she's a seer? No offense, Luna, but I thought you had a reputation for believing ... well, almost anything."

Luna turned back towards Hogsmeade. "Not so. I'm actually fairly particular about what strange impossible things I choose to believe in."

"Well, personally, I've seen enough from Hermione to trust her Third Eye," Lavender answered haughtily. "You just need to be more open-minded about such ..."

Luna interrupted the other girl with a sudden cry as she stood up quickly, dropping the dinner roll on the ground as she did. She gaped at Hogsmeade with a look of horror on her face.

"I take it back," she said in a shaky voice. "Hermione was wise to tell you not to go to Hogsmeade. I just wish she'd warned everyone else."

She turned to Remus with a frightened expression. "Mr. Sturgeon, you must send word to the Headmaster at once. The students who've gone to Hogsmeade must return immediately!"

"Why?" he asked guardedly.

"Can't you hear it?!" she exclaimed as she turned back towards the village. "Hogsmeade is *screaming*!"

Lavender and Remus looked at each other in confusion for a moment before their attention was seized by the sound of a

great explosion from somewhere in the town ... followed soon after by the manifestation of a Dark Mark in the sky over it.

Remus gasped in shock, and in a flash, a wand was in his hand. "***EXPECTO PATRONUM.***" His silvery wolf Patronus appeared to receive the message he wished to convey. "Go to Albus Dumbledore. Tell him that Hogsmeade is under attack and the Dark Mark has been seen!"

As he spoke, Lavender whispered to Luna in surprise – "*You mean he's not really a squib?!*" But the other girl's attention was still on Hogsmeade where so many of her friends still were.

His message sent, Lupin turned to Lavender. "Make sure that no students leave for Hogsmeade!" Then, he turned and ran down the pathway leading to the village with remarkable speed. Not an inhuman speed, necessarily, but enough to challenge the Muggle record for a 100 meter dash. The second he crossed the school's ward line, he disappeared in a pop of apparition.

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***12:06 p.m.***  
***Harry and Moody***

**BOOOM!**

"What the hell?!" Harry exclaimed in surprise as Moody's eye swiveled towards the direction of the blast. Harry looked that way too and gasped in shock as a thick cloud of mist appeared over the far side of town and then coalesced into a hideous skull from whose mouth a translucent snake seemed to slither out. While he'd never seen one in person, Harry was enough of a student of the last Wizarding War to recognize the Dark Mark.

"Merlin's bones," Moody exclaimed under his breath before he raised his wand to his throat.

"**SONOROUS!** ATTENTION! THIS IS ALASTOR MOODY! HOGSMEADE IS UNDER ATTACK! ALL HOGWARTS STUDENTS WILL RETURN TO THE SCHOOL IMMEDIATELY! ALL AURORS CONVERGE ON THE HOGSMEADE POST OFFICE AT ONCE!"

He canceled the spell and turned to the shocked boy. "Death Eaters," he said ruefully in confirmation of Harry's fears. "Or at the very least, thugs dressed up to look like Death Eaters. I'm going that way now. *You are not!* Get back to Hogwarts now!"

"What about Amy?!" Harry asked urgently. Moody thought for a second.

"Go to Madam Rosmerta. Tell her that I said to alert Lord Nott's party that all students are to go back to the school at once. She will get Amy for you. Now *move!*"

With that, Moody turned and hobbled away as fast as he could. Harry hesitated for a moment before turning back towards the Three Broomsticks. By this point, there was pandemonium in the streets of Hogsmeade as students were fleeing back towards the school and locals were taking shelter in their homes. He also heard apparition pops from all around. But then, just as he could see the inn in the distance, he noticed six cloaked figures running inside, their wands already drawn. And as he drew closer, he was horrified to hear someone in the inn yell out "**BOMBARDA!**" followed by another explosion. He crept closer and peered through a window before putting a hand over his mouth to stop himself from gasping aloud.

Inside, Madam Rosmerta and the remaining customers, both locals and Hogwarts students, were huddled together as the hostages of what appeared to be six partially-transformed werewolves under the leadership of the man who Harry recognized from the Prophet as Fenrir Greyback. The Blasting Curse had been meant for the inn's floo, which was now in a shambles. No help would be coming from that direction, nor would anyone be escaping through it.

Greyback growled out an order to his pack. "You three! Guard this room. Kill anyone who tries to enter or any hostages who try to fight back. Stavros and Jonny, you're with me." With that, the fearsome werewolf and two of his men bounded up the stairs.

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**12:09 p.m.**

***Upstairs at the Three Broomsticks***

To Amy's surprise, lunch with Tiberius Nott had not been utterly dreadful. The food was actually pretty good, and the adults were doing a good job of talking around the elephant in the room – the fact that her guardians were about to sell her off at the age of twelve to a man easily old enough to be her father. She was still utterly horrified by the idea of marrying Nott Sr., but for the moment at least, everyone was trying to cover up the awfulness with a veneer of civility. Unfortunately, the mood ended rather abruptly when the voice of someone named Alastor Moody announced that the town was under attack by ... *Death Eaters*?! Amy looked back and forth between the adults in the room who were as confused as her to hear about Death Eaters attacking the village. Apparently, they hadn't gotten the memo.

Seconds later, the room shook violently from sort of explosion below, causing Madam Goyle to let out a scream of terror. Nott rose quickly from his chair and closed his eyes.

"An Anti-Apparition Jinx is in effect," he said angrily as he drew his wand. Amy's face darkened at the realization that the cowardly old man had just tried to flee leaving his "*fiancée*" behind. From outside, they could hear the sounds of feet running up the stairs. Nott quickly fired off a Colloportus to bar the door, but he needn't have bothered. The door practically flew off its hinges from the strength of the blow Fenrir Greyback gave it. This time, Amy did scream as she backed away the nightmarish figure standing in the doorway. Although Greyback wasn't fully transformed, his partial transformation was frightening enough with his jet black eyes, protruding fangs, and clawed fingers.

"We're just here for the girl, Nott!" he snarled. "Give her up and you won't be harmed!"

The werewolf's statement caught Nott by surprise, so much so that he hesitated before aiming his wand at the intruders and wasn't fast enough. An Expelliarmus from one of the other werewolves caught the former Death Eater and knocked him into the far wall. Greg took the opportunity to flip over the table so that they would have some cover, and soon the three Goyles and their attackers were trading spells in the enclosed room. Amy had to duck down to avoid getting caught by spellfire, and to her horror, one of Greyback's men took a Stunner to the face without even slowing down as he rolled his way around the table towards her.

Then, Amy screamed again as the window next to her exploded inwards from the force of a garbage bin from the alley below that had been hurled through it. Terror turned to hope though when she recognized the voice that cried out from down below.

"AMY!" yelled Harry Potter. "JUMP!"

The Slytherin girl didn't hesitate. She took three running steps and hurled herself through the second-story window just before the werewolf could grab her. "**ARRESTO MOMENTUM!**" she heard Harry cry out as soon as she was clear of the broken window. Instantly, the spell took hold of her and let her fall gently to the ground. Then, Harry cast again. "**SERPENSORTIAOPPUGNO!**" There was a flash of light, and then the werewolf who had stuck his head through the window to snarl at the two of them was suddenly distracted by the angry king cobra that had just materialized on top of him. He fell back into room from which the sound of spellfire could still be heard. As Amy got up off the ground, Harry grabbed her wrist.

"Come on!" he ordered. Meanwhile, he waved his wand towards the window again. "**FUMOS MAXIMA!**" A thick mist poured from his wand, and as Harry and Amy fled the alleyway, the heavy fog soon reduced visibility in first the alley and then the nearby street to almost nothing. Harry, who could see perfectly well through the fog, led Amy across the street. Behind them, they could hear the sounds of shouting and then a crash as the werewolves followed them out the window and down the alleyway. In response, Harry gestured with his wand and whispered another incantation, one Amy didn't recognize. Suddenly, barely visible through the fog, there was another Harry and Amy running off in a different direction but much closer to the



werewolves. Meanwhile, Harry led Amy into the sidestreet where they took cover behind some old boxes.

*"Just stay quiet," he whispered. "When they've gone, we'll sneak back to the school."*

The two waited in silence for several seconds, only to start in surprise and fear when a nearby voice called out to them.

"Nice try, boy," growled Fenrir from the front of the alleyway. "A clever use of an illusion spell, but then you ruined it by whispering to your little friend." He snorted contemptuously. "Werewolf ears are far more sensitive than those of mere humans. Yet another way we're better than you." The other two werewolves behind him laughed at his remarks.

"Good to know," said Harry as stood up with his wand pointed towards the three werewolves. "**SONOROUS!**" he yelled with the accent on the first syllable instead of the second as Moody had used earlier. And that was enough to change the spell from the Sound-Enhancing Charm to the Glass-Shattering Curse. Instantly, all three werewolves staggered back in agony and clutched their hands over their ears in response to the deafening whine coming from Harry's wand. Across the street, Harry saw several windows shatter, including the front window of Quality Quidditch Supply. He adjusted his aim slightly and cried out again. "**ACCIO FIREBOLT!**" The werewolves were only beginning to recover from the sonic attack when one of them was knocked to the ground as Firebolt prototype from the window whacked him in the head on its way to Harry's grasp.

"This has been fun," Harry said as he and Amy mounted the broom. "But we really should be going."

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**12:13 p.m.**

***The Tonks Clinic***

Ted staggered back in agony as smoke rose from the burns on his hand. He lost his balance and fell, but Ron and Theo were there to catch him and pull him away from the smouldering door which was now covered with burning marks that said "OUTCAST" over and over again. Hermione looked at the door in horror.

"We need to get out of here right now," she declared. "Get Ted away from the door!" The two boys complied, while the girl readied her wand. "**ALOHOMORA!**" Magical energy washed against the front door of the clinic to no avail. She took a few steps back and tried something else.

**"BOMBARDA!"**

Theo and Ron barely had time to express their shock that she'd resorted to an explosive Charm in such an enclosed space. It didn't matter. That spell also had no effect except apparently to give encouragement to whatever force was vandalizing the door – instead of simply repeating the word "OUTCAST" the strange effect had moved on to complete sentences:

*"DIE, OUTCAST, DIE!"*

Undaunted, Hermione turned and tried again, this time firing the Blasting Hex against the nearby bay windows. "**BOMBARDA!**" This time, the glass shattered outward explosively, but before anyone even move towards the new opening, the broken glass froze in mid-air. Then, with a strange growling sound, the broken window reassembled itself. The three children hardly had time to realize what had happened when they were distracted by a fresh horror,

as the nearby floor erupted into a blazing bonfire so intense that the flames extended outside the stone hearth and began to climb up the wall above instantly incinerating the family pictures on the mantle. A blazing green bonfire of a shade that Theo had seen before and remembered in his nightmares.

"Merlin save us," he said in horror. "That's FIENDFIRE!"

And the cursed fire lived up to its name, as the flames erupting from the fireplace turned into a wall of solid fire that then manifested a great and terrible face with eyes and a leering mouth. And then, the fire spoke.

*"We're coming for you, Theo No-Name!"*

The face inhaled, as if drawing a deep breath. Instinctively, the children leaped out of the way as a gout of fire blasted across the room. Hermione was on one side where she'd managed to pull a semi-conscious Ted away from the spreading hellfire. Ron and Theo were on the other, with the fire on one side and the seemingly impenetrable door, window and wall (which was now covered in burning words that condemned Theo as an Outcast) on the other. And then, as if things couldn't get any worse, the curtains on either side of the window burst into green flames as well.

*"We're coming for you, and we're going to burn you alive!"*

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**12:19 p.m.**

***The alleyway across from the Three Broomsticks***

Swiftly, Harry and Amy took off, dodging spellfire as they went, but Harry was just able to make out the sound of Greyback summoning brooms for himself and his fellow werewolves. Harry cursed softly and flew down the alley

and circled around the building before gaining altitude. Unfortunately, their starting position required them to circle around Hogsmeade before heading back to the school. Even more unfortunately, Harry was dismayed to notice that the broom was not accelerating as he'd expected. Following the shopkeeper's instructions, he reached forward and touched his thumb to a small indentation in the wood had been scored with a faint rune, and instantly, diagnostic information about the Firebolt flowed into his mind. He swore softly and then jerked the broom to dodge a Stunner from the werewolves who were now airborne and in pursuit.

"What is it!?" Amy yelled to be heard over the sound of rushing air.

"The brooms still in Seeker-mode! Most of the custom acceleration Charms are disabled because having two riders throws off the balance! If it were in Standard-mode, we'd be going a lot faster. And if it was in Seeker-mode with just me, I'd already be home by now!"

"Can you switch modes?"

"Not without landing!" he replied. "Maneuverability Charms are fine, so we'll just have to dodge til we get back to Hogwarts. Like *now*!" Harry jerked the broom sharply in response to the sound of spellcasting behind them, and two red flashes shot by, missing them by just a few feet.

*"Well, on the bright side," Harry thought, "they're after Amy and want to take her alive, so no Killing Curses ... I hope."*

Harry flew fast as the broom would allow, but while he was still moving faster than the three werewolves on their stolen Nimbuses, their positioning and attacks stopped him

from just flying straight back to the castle. He decided his best bet was take an arcing path that would carry him over the Forbidden Forest onto the castle grounds. He only hoped he could outrun the Dementors. He dodged a few more spells and then held his wand behind him to cast another Smoke-Screen Charm as Amy held on for dear life.

Seconds later, they were approaching the Forbidden Forest. While there were about a hundred or so Dementors floating over the woods, the Forbidden Forest itself was huge and so the Dementors seemed to be spread out enough for Harry to plot a course between them. As he made his move towards the forest's air-space, however, Harry was shocked to see one Dementor in particular moving on what looked like an intercept course ... with a few dozen more apparently triggered by its actions and closing in on Harry's trajectory. At the last possible second, he yelled out "HANG ON!" and jerked the broom handle up as hard as he could. Instantly, the broom's velocity was redirected vertically. Amy didn't scream, but if she'd had her arms around Harry any tighter, he'd have probably broken some ribs.

As the broom shot higher and higher, Harry pointed his wand straight ahead and cast *Fumos Maxima* once more. Soon, the ascending broom was trailing a thick cloud of mist that he hoped would prevent the werewolves from getting a clear shot before he could get high enough to arc over the forest and onto the schools' grounds. He was successful, though unfortunately, not in the way he'd wanted. Frustrated at his inability to clearly see his quarry, Greyback and Stavros veered off until they were out of the magical fog before turning back to look at the students and their stolen Firebolt, still pursued by a determined Jonny.

"I think I've had enough of this shit," Fenrir snarled as he pointed his wand up in the Firebolt's general direction and

bellowed the incantation for a modified Bombarda. The spell shot up past and to the right of Harry and Amy before detonating in a shockwave just as their broom was even with it. The wave of force hit Harry like a wrecking ball and stunned him for an instant before he regained his senses. Immediately, the boy dilated his perceptions – ***Thump-thump*** – to take stock of his circumstances.

They weren't good. Now Amy *was* screaming, hysterically in fact. She was also about ten feet away from to his left, and the pursuing werewolf had altered course to catch her. His stolen Firebolt was about ten feet to his right but flying away from him in a lazy spiral. His holly and phoenix wand was only five feet in front of him but might as well have been back in his room for all the good that did. And the ground?

That was less than 2000 feet away and closing fast.

## Chapter End Notes

"Per vita mea, perfluat odium" is (hopefully) Latin for "Through my life, let hatred flow." Big shout-out to LordBritish for the translation assistance.

# Hogsmeade, pt 3

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### ***HAPTER 21: Chaos in Hogsmeade (pt 2)***

***12:12 p.m.***

#### ***The Streets of Hogsmeade***

James ran as fast as he could towards the explosion. It helped that Mad-Eye Moody had graciously yelled out the target location loud enough to be heard across town. While he and Moody had parted on bad terms, he still had enormous respect for the grizzled old veteran and he hoped the man would be along soon to assist. While James had insisted on an Auror Corps presence today, he had not been able to assign as many as he'd wanted. In addition to himself and Moody (who technically didn't count), there were only seven other aurors in the village: Gawain Robards, Kingsley Shacklebolt, young Michael Proudfoot, and four trainees in their last year at the Academy who were mainly here for field training. Oh, and the Tonks girl was here somewhere. Hopefully that would be enough.

Unfortunately, those hopes soon seemed to be in vain. As he turned the corner onto WIZARDING Way, the street that ran in front of the Hogsmeade Post Office, James was dismayed to see that the attackers looked to be over a dozen people in Death Eater uniforms and masks. All except for one – the leader who seemed eager to show off his face. Apparently, Sirius Black was just as arrogant and cocky as he'd been back at school.

There was no sign of either Robards or Moody, but Shack seemed to have taken command of the defense with Proudfoot and two of the trainees standing together behind a hastily conjured barrier that seemed in imminent danger of collapse under the Death Eater onslaught. Potter grimaced as he saw that the other two trainees were down, and from here, he couldn't tell whether they were even still alive.

There was a flash of green light, and James had to dive for cover behind a fruit and vegetable stand. He ducked his head up and fumed as he realized that it was Sirius who fired the Killing Curse at him. *The bastard!* Luckily, the stand had survived the spell – James was a Transfiguration specialist, and fruits and vegetables gave him a lot to work with. With a deft flick of his wand, all the apples, pears, tomatoes and other items in the cart suddenly transformed into huge wasps as big as a man's hand, and at his command, they flew out of the cart and began swarming over the Death Eaters.

Then, with a second flick, the entire empty cart itself transfigured into a large brass bull which instantly charged straight for Sirius Black. Those Death Eaters not distracted by the wasps sent cutting curses towards the bull, but they all bounced off its metal hide. But then, to James's surprise, Sirius Black *jumped over* the bull, firing off a Blasting Curse at James while in mid-air. The auror only barely jumped to safety, and even then, the concussive force threw him about twenty feet. Shackbolt summoned him to the barricade which was starting to crumble under the assault. Shaking off the impact of the explosion, James touched his wand to it, and the barricade quickly repaired itself and became even more durable. On the other side, over half the Death Eaters were still battling off wasps and the brass bull was circling around for another attack. As James



considered what spell to cast next, he was distracted by a loud pop and then surprised by its point of origin – up in the sky above the Dark Mark that loomed over the town.

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As Remus approached the ward line at Hogwarts, he could clearly see the Dark Mark in the sky. A veteran of the last Wizarding War, he knew all too well about the Dark Mark and some of its properties. In particular, there was now most likely an anti-apparition and anti-portkey jinx over Hogsmeade. But Remus also knew that the jinx extended out and down from the Mark in a cone-like shape. The jinx was probably not in affect in the airspace above it. That gave Remus an option, albeit a dangerous one. As soon as he hit the ward line, the werewolf apparated -

- and materialized in the air above the Dark Mark and about fifty feet over the rooftop of Tomes & Scrolls. Surviving the fall unscathed might have been challenging even for a werewolf but not for a werewolf who was also a 99th degree master of the Path of Air. As he started his fall, Remus extended his arms straight out, stiffened his legs, and allowed himself to spin around in mid-air like a top. The magic of his Wu Xi Do technique slowed his rate of fall so that he dropped almost gently to the rooftop. On his way down, he made note of the position of the Death Eaters in the street below. And especially, the position of Sirius Black. He pulled out his wand and stepped back into the opening kata for the *Tiger Pounces and Rolls* Technique, and then he ran for the edge of the rooftop.

With a mighty leap, Remus jumped off the two-story building to land feet first on the shoulders of one of the Death Eaters, knocking him to the ground and dislocating both his arms. Then, Lupin flipped off the man into a roll that carried him five feet away to the next nearest Death

Eater, who he knocked to the ground with a leg sweep before stunning him with his wand. Finally, he jumped up into a sprint, parrying incoming spells as he ran directly towards his old friend turned enemy. Along the way, he got off a Depulso that hurled one of the Death Eaters straight into the path of James's charging brass bull. When Remus was less than ten feet away from his target, he made an incredible leap that put him into position for a jumping side kick to Sirius's head. He struck the Death Eater so hard the man did a back flip to land on his stomach, seemingly stunned.

Unfortunately, the operative word was "seemingly." As Remus went to apprehend Sirius, the other man suddenly jumped up and slashed at Remus hard enough to rip his shirt and, worse, to make him lose his wand. Sirius himself had apparently abandoned his own wand in favor of his other more natural weapons. Or perhaps lupine rage gave him no choice, for the man now had the jet-black eyes, pronounced fangs, and deadly claws of a partially-transformed werewolf! Lupin's eyes narrowed, and he inhaled briefly to take in the other man's scent.

"You're not Sirius!" he growled.

"You're a dead man, whoever you are!" the imposter said as he lunged towards Remus. Remus snorted. As if he didn't have enough clues, the man's refusal to make the trademark Sirius/Serious joke clinched the deal.

The other werewolf slashed again with his right hand, but Remus was ready now. He caught the arm easily with his left hand and then struck with his right at a pressure point on the werewolf's upper arm. The man howled in pain and his right arm fell limp and paralyzed. Then, for good measure, Remus stepped forward and peppered the other

werewolf with a flurry of body blows, each of which struck additional chi points on his body. The false Sirius dropped to his knees, barely conscious. Finally, Remus pulled back his hand into a claw-like shape and focused his attention on the other man's heart. But then, he hesitated.

"No," he thought. *"I might be willing to damage my very soul to strike down the real Sirius Black. But not this pale imitation."* Instead of the *Eagle Talon Claims The Heart* Technique, Remus pulled his hand into a fist with the first and second fingers extended straight. In a quick serpentine movement, he poked the other man sharply in the forehead. Immediately, the imposter's eyes rolled back up in his head, and he fell over unconscious.

Needless to say, their leader being taken down so casually was fatal to the morale of his followers, and at a yelled command, the remaining Death Eaters apparated away (for the Dark Mark was designed to allow Death Eaters to pass through its wards). Immediately, James Potter ran forward, directing his men to secure the few Death Eaters still on hand and to begin triage for the wounded.

"And someone get me a Dementor here to deal with Sirius Black for good!" he barked. Remus turned to regard him coolly.

"I would reconsider that order, Chief Auror Potter. You should keep this one intact until he can be interrogated to see what he knows."

"We can get all we need from his followers, and there's a Kiss on sight order for all the Azkaban escapees ... whoever you are."

The corner of Remus's lips rose in faint amusement. "I am Malachi Sturgeon, the new Caretaker for Hogwarts. And

the Kiss on sight order for Sirius Black is irrelevant ... *since this man is not Sirius Black!*"

"What?!" James exclaimed.

"Observe," the Caretaker said calmly. "Ignoring the fact that he looks far too young to have spent the last twelve years in Azkaban, this man plainly shows signs of being a partially-transformed werewolf. Even if Sirius Black had contracted lycanthropy since his escape, two months is not nearly enough time to master a partial transformation." He knelt down over the unconscious man and rifled through his pockets before withdrawing a vial and sniffing it.

"And here is your answer. *Polyjuice potion!* Presumably using one of Black's hairs as a base."

"*And an old hair, for some reason,*" Remus thought to himself. "*Before he revealed his werewolf traits, he looked like Sirius from not long after our school days. Strange.*" He said none of that to James however, since he assumed his former friend would find both his presence and his skills suspicious enough. An assumption James immediately proved true.

"You're very knowledgeable for a caretaker, Mr. Sturgeon," James said cautiously.

Remus shrugged. "The Headmaster apparently saw the need for someone with better credentials when replacing Mr. Filch."

"Not to mention rather powerful and unusual fighting skills. Do you have anything to say about *that*, Mr. Sturgeon?"

Remus stood and regarded his ex-friend without emotion. "Only that Albus Dumbledore will reassure you that I have

his full confidence. And as I have already summoned him via Patronus, he can answer ... your ..."

The man's voice trailed off as he stared past Potter at something in the distance. Potter turned as well. It looked as though there were several people engaged in aerial combat about a mile away. It was too far for him to recognize who was involved, but Remus's eyes were much sharper. Then, both men flinched as there was a loud boom from a Blasting Curse that knocked two of the flyers off their broom. Remus's eyes widened in horror.

"Who is that?" James asked in confusion before turning around sharply as the Caretaker practically growled at him.

"I *believe*, Chief Auror Potter," he spat with an anger that surprised the man, "that it is *your son ... falling to his death!*"

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***12:13 p.m.***

***Near the Three Broomsticks***

*Lily ran back towards the Three Broomsticks, herding students back towards Hogwarts as she went. She made it back to Madam Rosmerta's tavern in time to see Harry's departure ... and scream at the sight of his pursuers.*

It seemed as though Harry and some girl (it was too far to say who) were flying off with three men – no, three werewolves! – in pursuit. And she was sure the one in the lead was *Fenrir Greyback*! She aimed her wand in a fury and screamed out her strongest blasting curse, but the brooms were too fast and her spell went wide. Frustrated, she looked around for someone who might be able to help. The windows of Quality Quidditch had been blasted in, but

she was hopeless on a broom. Then, up ahead, she saw movement ... and froze.

The deserted street in front of the Three Broomsticks had been full of a strange fog that was quickly lifting, but through it, she could make out the figure of a large man who stepped out of the bar and aimed a wand at her.

**"AVADA KEDAVRA!"** Instantly, she hurled herself to the ground and took aim at her attacker. The fog had cleared enough for her to see that it was another partially-transformed werewolf.

**"EXPELLIARMUS!"** There was a flash of light, and the man's wand went flying. Then, he snarled in a fury, and he took off towards her in a run with his claws extended. Lily's eyes narrowed angrily. Without a wand, a werewolf could still hurt her if it got close enough, but she had a spell for that. **"LEVICORPUS!"** Another flash of light struck the werewolf, and suddenly, he was flipped upside down and hanging from mid-air by one ankle. Lily got up and ran for the inn, summoning the werewolf's wand as she went.

As she drew closer to the door, she could hear screams coming from inside and the sound of someone – Madam Rosmerta, she thought – begging for mercy. Lily stepped into the common room with her wand already drawn, and when she saw that there were two more werewolves threatening their hostages while they argued what to do next, she didn't hesitate. **"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"** At once, a silvery fog blasted from her wand to quickly resolve into the form of a beautiful translucent doe. It danced and capered in front of the two werewolves, and for a moment, they seemed entranced by its moonsilver color ... right up until the moment the doe reared up on its hind legs and kicked one of the werewolves in the forehead with its front

hooves. The werewolf screamed and fell backwards, his forehead smoking slightly.

The second werewolf came out of the entranced state then and angrily pointed his wand towards Lily. But before he could fire, another voice called out. "**STUPEFY!**" It was Gregory Goyle who had made his way down the staircase to shoot the werewolf from behind. His spell had no effect on the werewolf except to annoy him, but it was enough to cause a distraction.

"**LANGLOCK!**" Lily called out, and a purple bolt struck the werewolf just as he pointed his wand again.

"**AVADA GAADEEEGAH!**" he gargled as his tongue was suddenly stuck to the roof of his mouth. For good measure, Lily sent two more Levicorpus spells, and the tongue-tied werewolf and his companion were both hanging from their ankles. A second later, she had them disarmed for good measure. Over on the staircase landing, Greg Goyle was looking at her in something approaching awe. She ignored him and looked towards the ruined fireplace, cursing as she noticed its condition.

"Dammit! We need to get help! My son Harry is on the run from three other werewolves!"

"Is Amy with him?" Greg asked urgently. Lily turned to look at him in surprise.

"*Who?*" she inquired before the sound of an explosion distracted her from further inquiry.

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**12:15 pm**  
***The Tonks Clinic***

*Then, the face inhaled, as if drawing a deep breath. Instinctively, the children leaped out of the way as a gout of fire blasted across the room. Hermione was on one side where she'd managed to pull a semi-conscious Ted away from the spreading hellfire. Ron and Theo were on the other, with the fire on one side and the seemingly impenetrable door, window and wall (which was now covered in burning words that condemned Theo as an Outcast). And then, as if things couldn't get any worse, the curtains on either side of the window burst into green flames as well.*

***"WE'RE COMING FOR YOU, AND WE'RE GOING TO BURN YOU ALIVE!"***

Once Hermione had Ted a reasonably safe distance from the flames, she turned back to the wall of green flames. Her face paled in terror at the daemonic faces that seemed to flicker in and out of the unholy fire. She raised her wand in a quivering hand. "AGUA...!"

"NOOOOO!" Theo screamed out, interrupting her incantation. "That won't work! Only a few spells can work on Fiendfyre! And any other magic besides those will just feed the flames!"

Ron looked at Theo in surprise. "How do you know so much about Fiendfyre?!"

Theo grimaced. "My dad – ex-dad – was a Death Eater. You pick stuff up."

"Uh-huh. So what *does* work on Fiendfyre?"

"Nothing we could possibly cast as Third Years, but a barrier that's flame resistant can slow it down ... well, a little anyway." He yelled to Hermione on the other side of



the barrier. "Hermione! Start dousing that couch on your side with Aguamenti, and then freeze it with a Glacius!"

The girl nodded quickly and began soaking the couch.

"So what, toss it onto the fire and then climb over it before it ignites?" Ron asked.

"It's the only idea I've got," Theo replied as he wiped pouring sweat from his brow. Breathing was becoming difficult for both boys. "It would take a lot of luck, but a miracle's the only way we're surviving anyway. Honestly, I don't know why we haven't been incinerated already. It's like the fire is ... deliberately taking its time. Like it wants to slow-cook us instead of just burn us up fast."

He glanced the room as more threats against him – "*DIE, OUTCAST, DIE!*" – were still burning their way into the very walls.

"And also screw with my head, apparently. It doesn't look like there's anyone controlling the fire, so if it was just summoned and released, it should have taken out half the town by now."

"Cheery thought," Ron muttered as he undid the top button of his shirt, which was already drenched in sweat. "So it's probably too risky to climb over it even with a frozen couch on top of it." Theo nodded dejectedly. Ron closed his eyes in concentration.

"*Water flows around,*" he whispered to himself. Then, his eyes popped open, and with a swift wand movement, he levitated a nearby bookcase over near the wall opposite the fireplace as close to the raging fire as he could without it igniting.

"Hermione!" he yelled. "When I give signal, levitate the couch and drop it on top of the fire right there!" He pointed towards where the fire met the wall, near where the bookshelf was waiting.

"So do we have a plan?" Theo asked, who was beginning to grow dizzy from the heat.

"More of a crazy gamble. Did Mr. Sturgeon ever teach you the *Wave Crashes Against the Cliff* Technique?"

"Yeah. I tried it once. I ended up landing on my head."

"Well, I reckon here's your chance to do it better," Ron said before yelling to Hermione. "NOW!"

Hermione flicked her wand, and the sodden and frozen couch flipped over and landed against the wall, temporarily suppressing the flames underneath. Simultaneously, Ron dropped the bookshelf so that it was leaning at an angle against the wall next to the couch. Instantly, Ron took off running for the bookshelf with Theo close behind. The two boys ran up the inclined bookshelf and then, at the top, kicked off against the wall to side flip over the couch. Theo didn't execute the move as gracefully as Ron did, but he did make it successfully to the other side of the couch before it burst into flames. The two boys quickly joined Hermione and the barely-conscious Ted.

"I think I'm getting the hang of this stuff," Theo murmured in surprise.

Hermione stared at the boys in amazement. "What? How? What?" she stammered.

"*Wave Crashes Against the Cliff* Technique," Ron said, as if that answered any of the girl's questions. "So now that

we're all together, what do we do?"

There was a terrible growl behind them as the Fiendfyre consumed the couch and then started spreading slowly across the wall in their direction. Then, a second bestial roar echoed through the house, as the kitchen area also caught fire independently.

"So much for the back door," Theo said with asperity. "Up the stairs!"

With no other options, the three children (and the levitated delirious Ted Tonks) headed up to the second floor, with the mocking laughter of the demonic flames following behind as if in deliberate pursuit.

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**12: 19 p.m.**

***Outside the Tonks Clinic***

*Robards managed to throw the witch off, but to his horror, there were now dozens of people chanting the word "Outcast" with a terrifying intensity. Not everyone nearby seemed to be affected, but those that were immediately turned on those who were not. He managed to stun three villagers before he was knocked to the ground, his wand sent flying. Then, the maddened villagers dog-piled him, punching and kicking him as they went.*

Suddenly ...

"**FLIPPENDO!**" cried two voices in unison, and Auror Robards was both startled and relieved when his attackers went flying away. He scrambled to his feet and limped towards his saviors, summoning his wand back with one hand while wiping blood off his face with the other. To his

surprise, it was two young people: a girl and a young man. He thought he recognized the female.

"Rossum, right?" he asked. "One of the new trainees?"

"Yes sir," Emily said crisply. "And this is my ... friend, Marcus Flint." Flint nodded respectfully to the Auror.

"Well, thanks for the assistance," Robards said as he cast a Flipping Hex of his own to knock back the advancing villagers. "But how are you with Shield Charms?"

"I know all the Protego series Charms, sir," Emily said as she sent a few Stunners into the crowd.

"I, um, know the basic spell, but I can't hold them for very long," Marcus stammered.

"Well do the best you can then," the auror said. "Target them overlapping right there!" He pointed to a spot on the ground just a few feet in front of them. "Now!"

Emily and Marcus each cast their strongest shield spells as directed. Then, Robards took a deep breath and flicked his own wand madly at the shield. "**PROTEGO MAXIMA. FIANTO DURI. REPELLO INIMICUM.**" Suddenly, Marcus's wand started vibrating, and it seemed to give off a mild electric shock, as the small shield he and Emily had cast together shuddered, expanded, and then wrapped itself around the mob, creating a ten-foot-tall wall of force that contained the rampaging villagers. But the strain was great for a single wizard, and Gawain's knees buckled, though Marcus caught him before he fell.

"Thanks, lad. That ... takes a lot out of you. Should give us a few minutes though."

"So what now, sir?" Emily asked anxiously.

"Now? You two get to play catch." With that, Auror Robards bent down and touched his wand to the ground. Instantly, the earth beneath him rose up to form a tower of stone high enough to give him a view of the whole street ... and a clear shot those villagers who seemed unaffected by the strange madness and thus had become victims for those who were under its sway.

**"ACCIO WOMAN IN BLUE ROBES! ACCIO OLD MAN IN KILT! ACCIO BOY AND GIRL WHO CLIMBED THE TREE FOR SAFETY!"**

In response to each spell, another person was yanked out of the enclosure and flew away from the mob through the air towards Robards only to get caught by a Levitation Charm from either Emily or Marcus and lowered safely to the ground. By this point, a few dozen of the rage-maddened villagers were now rushing the Protego shield and violently hurling themselves at it out of a desire to harm those on the other side who were unaffected. And all the while, they kept screaming hysterically: "OUTCAST! OUTCAST!"

Suddenly, a familiar voice drew the auror's attention. It was Alastor Moody, followed close behind by his former pupil, Nymphadora Tonks.

"ROBARDS!" bellowed the former auror. "I ordered every auror to the Post Office which is under attack by Death Eaters! What the hell is going on here?! Report!"

"Dammit, Alastor!" Robards replied irritably.

"You're *retired*! I don't have to give you reports anymore, let alone follow your *orders*!"

"No, but you will anyway. You'll have enough sense to do what I say because you'll realize I'm probably *right*. Now what's going on?"

Robards rolled his eyes at the old man's (usually justifiable) arrogance. "Some kind of psychomagical effect emanating from the Tonks Clinic! I was actually on my way to the Post Office when it went off. It's causing some kind of violent madness among the affected townspeople!"

"*What?!*" Nymphadora gasped at that news while her mentor surveyed the street.

"But not all of them, I see," Moody replied thoughtfully. As he spoke, he withdrew his wand into its holster and then pulled a small wooden rod from an inside pocket. It looked vaguely wand-like but was thicker and less delicate. He held the rod up to his lips and whispered something, and suddenly, the rod became a five-foot-long staff covered in obscure runes and markings. As Robards began to sputter, Moody tapped the staff twice times to the ground, and suddenly, he was lifted up on a stone tower that rose out of the earth like the one Robards had transfigured.

"That's ... that's a bloody *battle stave!*" the auror exclaimed. "There is no way that's legal for a civilian to own!"

Moody barked out a laugh. "Take it up with the Chief Auror. Wonderboy Potter signed off on the paperwork three days before I retired. You should probably be aware that your boss never reads anything that someone he trusts puts in front of him before he sticks his autograph on it."

With that, Moody began to spin the staff around his body in a complicated pattern before finally pointing it towards the center of the enclosure. "**SOMNIUM HORRIBILUS!**" There was a wave of magical energy that rolled over the

raging mob, and almost instantly, the people trapped inside the ward all fell to the ground unconscious. Soon after, the twin pillars bearing Robards and Moody aloft sank back down into the earth while the shield-ward was allowed to dissipate.

"Well, that's one problem solved," Robards said.

"And another one started!" exclaimed Marcus. "*Look!*" The boy gestured further down the street behind them, where a fist fight had broken out among several citizens outside the wards. And most of them were also yelling "OUTCAST!" at the top of their lungs as well.

"Dammit!" Moody swore. "Whatever it is, it's spreading!"

"Well whatever's causing it seems to be centered on the Tonks Clinic," Robards said as he pointed towards the building that was still illuminated by an eerie light and giant floating runes.

"What the hell is that rune?!" exclaimed Tonks, who only noticed the strange markings floating in the air around her home after Robards' ward had fallen. "My father's still in there!" She advanced towards the clinic only to stagger back in surprise when a set of first floor windows exploded with a blast of green fire.

"Merlin preserve us!" Robards exclaimed in horror.

"That's *Fiendfyre!*"

"*NOOO!*" Tonks screamed as she started to run towards the door only to be grabbed by Moody and Robards.

"No, girl!" Moody ordered. "You can't rush into a building burning with hellfire! It's suicide!"

"But my father's in there! And Theo was bringing some of his friends over for lunch! They must be trapped inside!"

"It's too late, child!" Robards said solemnly.

"No it's not," Moody answered, his eye whirling madly. "I see four people in there. A man and three children. The man looks hurt, but they're all safe up on the second floor. Well, alive, anyway. Hardly safe though."

Tonks looked at her burning home in panic for a few seconds before she took a deep breath and screamed as loud as she could. "*IIII-RISSSS!*"

Barely a second later, there was a soft pop as Iris, the Tonks's house elf appeared beside her.

"Miss Dora! You's shouldn't be calling Iris like that! Iris was with the Doctor Mistress Andi who is..." Iris's scolding faded away as she saw what was happening to her master's clinic and home.

"Goodness gracious!" she exclaimed softly.

"Iris," Tonks said urgently. "Dad is still in there! Along with Theo and two of his friends! Can you do anything to help them?"

Iris shook her head fearfully. "Miss Dora, something has been done to the wards. Something *evil!* Iris does not know if she can pass through!"

Tonks knelt down next to the diminutive creature. "Iris, please. It's ... it's *my dad!*" she begged with tears in her eyes.



Iris looked up at the girl she'd helped raise since infancy. Then, she closed her eyes and scrunched her face up into a mask of intense concentration. After a few seconds, she gave a gasp of pain and then popped away.

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***12:20 p.m.***

***The Ministry of Magic  
London***

Dumbledore had been in a meeting with Minister Fudge, Barty Crouch Sr., Ludo Bagman and several other notable Ministry officials to discuss details pertaining to security for the following summer's Quiddich World Cup and some other international events to be held at Hogwarts later in the year when he received Remus's Patronus message: "*Hogsmeade is under attack and the Dark Mark has been seen!*"

Less than a minute later, alarms were sounding throughout the Ministry, and the Auror Corp mobilized only to realize that all floo connection to Hogsmeade had been cut off. To his mounting frustration, Albus realized that he'd wasted too much time trying to provide an alternate route for the assembled aurors. They could not travel directly to Hogsmeade (whether by floo, apparition, or portkey), they could not travel to Hogwarts (because of the castle's on defenses against intruding aurors - a fact that infuriated Fudge), and there were no places near enough to the site of the attack but outside the range of the Dark Mark that anyone knew well enough to allow for portkeys or direct apparation.

"*And naturally,*" Albus thought ruefully, "*this would also happen just a few days after Fawkes's last burning day!*" Finally, it was decided that a force of a dozen aurors would travel by floo to the Ministry field office in Edinburgh and

from there fly disillusioned by broom to Hogwarts, at least half-an-hour's journey. In the meantime, Albus would floo directly back to his office and do what he could. As he passed through into his office, he gave a regretful glance towards his tiny familiar resting on his perch before he was distracted by the sound of some nearby explosion. The Headmaster rushed to the nearest window with a view of Hogsmeade, almost certain that he was already too late to prevent the latest disaster.

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***12:21 p.m.***

***Inside the Tonks Clinic***

The three children had managed to get Ted Tonks (who was still moaning in delirious agony) up to the second floor landing when the man started convulsing. The heat was unbearable as they made their way into the master bedroom where Ron and Theo laid Ted on the floor and tried to hold him down. On the far wall was a wide double-window behind a heavy king-sized sleigh bed. Hermione tried to blast the window again, this time with the Glass-Shattering Curse, but once more, the window reformed itself instantly.

"What ... what do we do?" said Theo, whose own vision was starting to swim from the terrible heat. From somewhere below, they heard a terrible mocking laughter.

"I ... I'm sorry, Theo," Hermione said despairingly as she looked down at Ted Tonks whose face was a mask of agony. From what little she knew of Fiendfyre, even seemingly minor burns were usually fatal. "I don't ... I don't know what to do next."

Ron grimaced as he and the other two struggled to hold down the Healer who was now writhing in agony. And he couldn't help but think back to the lessons his father had tried to teach him and his siblings all their lives. "*Do what's right instead of what's easy*," he said softly.

"Eh? What was that?" Theo asked, but Ron ignored him. He looked to Hermione instead.

"Hermione, I'm about to cast a spell. After I do, I want you to count to three. And then, I want you to *slap me* hard across the face. Okay?"

"What?!" she said in confusion. "Why?"

"Because if you don't, I'll probably die. And then, Jim will kill me." With that oddly paradoxical statement, he pointed his wand towards Ted's burnt and blackened hand.

**"SSSSAMSSSSARA,"** he hissed softly.

---

When Iris arrived in the living room of what had been her home, she nearly spat in anger. It had been physically painful to pass through the corrupted wards – no elf not attuned to the dwelling could have even done so – but that was nothing compared to seeing the damage done to the interior by the raging (if slow-burning) hellfire. She knew at once that the hellfire was not normal, not even by the standards typically wrought by the Fiendfyre Curse. This fire did not burn with abandon but with intent. It wanted to kill young Theo No-Name but slowly so that it would have time to work its foul business on the good people of Hogsmeade.

And unlike normal Fiendfyre, this version was powered not by the weak hatred of mortal wizards, a hatred sullied by

the complexities of the human condition and which was so often indistinct from love. No, this hellfire had been summoned by an invocation of True Hate. The Hate that could only be found in The Other Place. The purest Hate that was a perfect distillation of the urge to hurt, to kill, to annihilate, completely devoid of any other possible emotion or impulse. The *Singular* Hate. It was a Hate that was not meant for this world.

Aware of the house elf's presence, a huge column of green flame rose up and formed a terrible face that snarled at Iris almost hungrily. She wrinkled her nose at it in contempt and then popped away before it could surge forward to consume her. She was saddened by the loss of what had been her home, but she knew it was beyond saving, and even if it were not so, she had different orders at the moment. Her family needed her.

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Theo and Hermione both gasped in shock as Ron touched the now-glowing tip of his wand to Ted's hand. There was a flash of light, and Ted's body went rigid, as did Ron's. Hermione stared in confusion, but then she remembered what Ron had said and slapped him as hard as she could. He fell back and banged his head against the foot of the bed. Ted relaxed. His hand was still burned but no longer unnaturally so, and his convulsions ended. He seemed to be merely unconscious now.

"*Whoof!* Bloody hell, Hermione! I said slap me, not dislocate my jaw!"

"Sorry," she apologized. "But, um, did you just ... you know?" Beside her, Theo just stared in absolute amazement at the second Gryffindor Parselmouth he'd met.

"Yeah, about that," Ron said uneasily. "I'd appreciate it if you two kept that to yourselves. I mean, if we don't all burn to death in the next few minutes. Anyway, Ted's not in danger of dying. Well, except for Fiendfyre. But I don't know if we should wake him yet."

"You should not," Iris calmly interrupted, though her sudden arrival still caused the three children to jump in fright. "Although your quick action has saved Doctor Master Tonks from death, he is still weak and has entered into a healing coma."

There was a roar from the hallway behind her. Theo wasn't sure, but it sounded almost like some terrible beast had called out his name, and there was a sickly green light that illuminated the corridor as the flames reached up to the second floor. Iris snapped her fingers and the door to the hallway slammed shut. With a second snap, Ted's unconscious body lifted itself off the floor and floated over onto the bed.

"Iris thanks you all for what you done for my master. You are all very special wizardlings. Iris hopes you all know that. Now! Quick like a bunny! All of you get onto the bed with Doctor Master Tonks!"

The three children did as the house elf ordered. Iris snapped her fingers again, and several items summoned from elsewhere in the house landed in Theo's hands: a few healing potions presumably meant for Ted; framed certificates identifying Ted and Andi as Master Healers; and finally a thick scrapbook. On the front of it was a moving photo of a deliriously happy Ted and Andi holding up a newborn babe with pink hair as a happy Iris stood beside them. The words "The Tonks Family - Ted, Andi, Nymphadora, and Iris" floated over their heads.

Then, the bedroom door exploded off its hinges, and all three children screamed in terror. For at the threshold of the room stood a monster. It was a misshapen humanoid, roughly nine feet tall and four feet across, with long arms that ended in wicked talons. And it was made of Fiendfyre.

"*BUUUURRRRNN YOU!*" it roared as it took a step into the room, simultaneously shattering and igniting the door frame as it forced its way through. Before it could take another step, Iris snapped her fingers once more, and the bed lifted up into the air. At first, to the children's horror, it flew closer to the fire monster, and they screamed even louder. But even as the creature reached out for Theo No-Name, the bed reversed course and blasted out through the window to crash-land on the street below. Ted and the three children were bumped about somewhat rudely, but the thick mattress absorbed the impact, and they were none the worse for wear from the fall.

Inside the master bedroom, the windows resealed immediately after the bed's departure. The fire creature roared its anger.

*"YOU HAVE NOT RESCUED THE OUTCAST, LAR IRIS!  
YOU HAVE ONLY DRAWN OUT MY HUNT AND MADE ME  
STRONGER FOR IT!"*

The monster turned on Iris and advanced towards her, but the tiny house elf showed no fear. This was not true Fiendfyre, after all. It was a manifestation of True Hate which was fueled not by mortal anger but by the corrupted wards of the clinic, wards that would not survive the destruction of the clinic itself. And as a house elf bonded with this place, destroying the Tonks Clinic was certainly within her power. Alas, she could only do so from within the building itself.

The heat from the approaching creature poured over Iris, but she simply closed her eyes and smiled. She could see it now, the shape of her ending. She had done as Young Mistress Dora had commanded. She had saved the girl's father. She had saved the three little wizardlings who had protected him until she could arrive. She would even save the poor deluded wizards outside who had become enthralled by the power of True Hate. She had done her duty to the last.

She was a good elf.

When the fire demon's hand was less than a foot away, Iris snapped her fingers a final time, and the supporting walls of the Tonks Clinic imploded. From outside, it looked as though the entire building simply collapsed in on itself. There was a sudden and terrifying surge of green fire that erupted from the ruins that vaguely resembled a giant grasping hand accompanied by a roar of pain and frustrated rage. Then, as swiftly as they'd come, the flames receded and then disappeared, leaving behind nothing but smoldering ruins.

Nymphadora Tonks ran over to the bed that had miraculously survived being flung out of the burning building, with Moody and the others close behind. She saw that the children were fine and that her father was unconscious but alive. Then, she looked around wildly and cried out. "IRIS! IRIS!" There was no sign of her family's house elf. She turned back to Theo, who was still clutching the scrapbook, the only memento of the elf who had been a part of Dora's family since before she was born. Tears rolled down the boy's cheeks.

Their reunion was disrupted by the sound of a terrible explosion from somewhere near Hogwarts. All of them

turned to look in that direction, but all they could see were several figures on brooms, two of which seemed to have been knocked off. Only Moody's magical eye could tell who the falling wizards were.

"*Potter*," he whispered in horror at the sight of the boy he'd practically taken as an apprentice falling to his death.

---

**12:29 p.m.**

***About 2000 feet high ...***

*Fenrir snarled as he pointed his wand up in the Firebolt's general direction and bellowed the incantation for a modified Bombarda. The spell shot up past and to the right of Harry and Amy before detonating in a shockwave just as their broom was even with it. The wave of force hit Harry like a wrecking ball and stunned him for an instant before he regained his senses. Immediately, the boy dilated his perceptions - Thump-thump - to take stock of his circumstances.*

*They weren't good. Now Amy was screaming. She was also about ten feet away from to his left, and the pursuing werewolf had altered course to catch her. His stolen Firebolt was about ten feet to his right but flying away from him in a lazy spiral. His holly and phoenix wand was only five feet in front of him but might as well have been back in his room for all the good that did. And the ground?*

*That was less than 2000 feet away and closing fast.*

***Thump-thump - 2000 feet.***

As the reality of his dire situation became apparent, Harry was briefly distracted by how calm he felt before realizing that he had instinctively used his Occlumency to



temporarily shut down his fear response. Even at his maximum dilation, he guessed he had less than a minute of subjective time to figure something out before he hit the ground, so panic was the last thing he needed. While his wand was spinning farther and farther away, his dilated senses perceived it as doing so relatively slowly, and the rush of air that accompanied his fall was a deceptively gentle but cool breeze. Even the terrified screams of Amy Wilkes were distorted and sounded deep and slow to his ears, like a recording that had been slowed down.

Harry's first and most obvious thought was quickly assessed and just as quickly discarded. While he had a portkey in the form of a toe ring on his right foot, the instructions he'd been given on portkey usage made it very clear how incredibly dangerous it was to use a portkey while falling from any significant height as there was a strong likelihood of materializing halfway through the floor at the destination. Granted, the portkey would take him straight to the St. Mungo's Emergency Ward, but even the healers there wouldn't be able to do much if a large enough chunk of his body was splinched off and landed somewhere on a lower level of the hospital. And anyway, even if the portkey wasn't instantly fatal, using it at this point meant leaving Amy Wilkes to whatever fate Greyback intended for her, something Harry refused to even consider.

His next thought was to summon his wand *wandlessly*. Granted, his previous attempts to do so had resulted in hundreds of failed attempts without a single quiver of motion from the wand. Of course, being in fear for his life might give Harry the impetus to finally succeed, but he would need to end the dilation to attempt it. Since he would likely only have a single chance to summon the wand before the *splat*, he chose to wait before making one last all-or-nothing attempt. In the meantime, mindful of what Alastor

Moody had said earlier, Harry opened up a secondary thought-stream dedicated to remembering everything he could about the Summoning Charm while his first mind worked on other options.

*"Okay," he thought quickly but not quite frantically, "time for a quick brain-storming session. I can't use any spells I know without a wand. So what else is there? Apparition? I did apparently do that once a few years ago with accidental magic. But usually accidental magic stops happening after you get a wand. Something Lucius said last May about how letting a wand choose you represents a magical promise to only use magic in the proper manner. I guess it might kick in since it's a life-or-death situation, but it's hardly something I can realistically hope for, let alone actively make happen. And it still has the problem of leaving Amy to the werewolves!"*

### ***Thump-thump - 1800 feet.***

Harry frowned mentally at the sensation of his heart beating slowly but not near slowly enough under the circumstances, a constant reminder of how little time he had to pull off a miracle.

*"Focus, Potter!" he thought furiously. "What else can you do without a wand? The animagus transformation doesn't require a wand does it? No that's stupid. It takes years to learn to be an animagus. Well, unless you're a million-to-one freak of nature that can do it on the first try, but since nothing in your entire life has ever suggested that you're a natural animagus, it's kind of silly to think you're just going to learn how in the next six seconds! And anyway, there's absolutely no reason to think your hypothetical animagus form is even something that could fly!"*

Frustrated that the "brainstorming session" had come to an end without any useful ideas, Harry was further dismayed by how slow his secondary thought-stream was in reviewing his collection of Accio Wand memories. At the current rate of review, it might take hours to recall every one of those memories. Morbidly, he wondered if some part of him in the afterlife might be stuck thinking about the Summoning Charm even after he was dead. In desperation, he opened up a third thought-stream dedicated to wandless magic in hopes that it might double the rate of his memory review. To his pleasant surprise, it did not. Rather, if anything, it seemed to *square* it, and for a brief instant, Harry nearly lost the dilation as his mind reeled under the onslaught of memories, not just of his prior efforts at wandless casting but of everything he'd ever been told on the subject.

*Accio wand. Accio wand. Accio wand. Accio wand. Accio wand.*

*Accio wand. Accio wand. Accio wand. Accio wand. Accio wand.*

*"Learning to cast a spell wandlessly requires you to link one of these spells directly to your core with a psychic strand that represents the sum total of your experience with casting that particular spell."*

*Accio wand. Accio wand. Accio wand. Accio wand. Accio wand.*

*Accio wand. Accio wand. Accio wand. Accio wand. Accio wand.*

*"Even if you should one day master wandless magic in some form, it will still be based on your sense memory of casting the same spells with a wand in your hand."*

*Accio wand. Accio wand. Accio wand. Accio wand. Accio wand.*

*Accio wand. Accio wand. Accio wand. Accio wand. Accio wand.*

***Thump-thump - 1600 feet.***

As the ground grew nearer, a mad and desperate idea began to form. Thus far, Harry had never even attempted to maintain more than three sub-brains at once. He'd never had need to, the prospect seemed too daunting, and perhaps most importantly, Snape had indicated that it would be highly painful and possibly physically dangerous. But in the grand scheme of things, Harry reckoned that it couldn't possibly be more painful and dangerous than falling to his death from a great height. So he braced himself and opened a fourth channel. It actually wasn't as painful as he'd expected, though it did trigger perhaps the worst ice cream headache he'd ever experienced. Prepared for the pain, Harry held onto his dilation, and with his newest thought-stream, he focused on the arithmantic and runic implications of the Summoning Charm.

*Accio wand.*

Two words. Nine letters total. Late Etruscan-Early Roman origin.

Accio. Five letters. Three syllables. Latin root. Wand. Four letters. One word.

Derived from speaker's native tongue. Accio wand. Base wand pattern of seven

Akkadian cuneiform symbols. Arithmantic summation of  $2.9/5.3./4.1/7 = 31$ .

*Accio wand.*

Even with four active minds, Harry still did not feel that he was ready to try a last ditch summoning attempt, and yet,

he hesitated to open a fifth thought-stream. For one thing, it seemed presumptuous that a thirteen-year-old boy who'd been studying Occlumency for less than three years might try matching a feat that (as far as Snape knew) had only ever been attempted by the legendary Werner Von Mises. For another, the experience had apparently been so painful and debilitating to Von Mises that he never tried it again.

***Thump-thump - 1400 feet.***

Then again, as far as the boy knew, Von Mises had never been as motivated to push the boundaries of the psychic arts as Harry was right now. The Slytherin's heart had already beat five times. Seven full beats would be just as fatal as hitting the ground or having an Occlumency-triggered aneurysm while en route. No one was close enough to save him. And no one else was close enough to save Amy before the werewolf grabbed her and apparated away to whatever fate awaited her. Harry summoned up his Gryffindor side. He would do the impossible and learn to summon his wand in the next few seconds or he would die knowing he'd done all he could. With that cheery thought, he steeled himself for the pain Snape had warned of and opened up a fifth thought-stream.

***"AAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHH!"***

It was so much worse than he'd expected. It really did feel like someone was stabbing him in the back of the head with an red-hot icepick. Only through a supreme act of willpower was Harry able to maintain both his dilation and his multiple thought-streams as virtually everything he knew about the Summoning Charm and wandless magic in general roared through his head like a typhoon.

*acowandacciowandacciowand2.9/5.3./4.1=31acciowandacci  
owand  
elevenincheshollyphoenixfeatheracciowandacciowandaccio  
wand  
psychicstrandsconnectcoretospellacciowandacciowandacci  
owand  
Akkadianrunesacciowandacciowandsensememoryacciowan  
d  
curiousmisterpotterverycuriousindeedacciowandacciowand  
acciowand  
amyisscreaminggottosavehermadeapromiseacciowandaccio  
wand  
sevenisthemostpowerfulmagicalnumberacciowandacciowan  
d*

To Harry's sudden alarm, there were now three wands spinning in the air in front of him, and he was terribly confused as to where the other two came from until he realized that it was simply blurred vision. He also detected a strong scent of copper in the air and suspected that if he lived long enough to release his dilation, his nose would start bleeding profusely. "*One problem at a time,*" he thought as he prepared to go where Von Mises himself had feared to tread.

### ***Thump-thump - 1200 feet.***

Harry opened a sixth thought-stream and then screamed within his mind. When he was older and had actually been subjected to the Cruciatus Curse, he would nevertheless believe in absolute seriousness that it had not been quite as bad as having six brains operating simultaneously, all of them shouting random memories and facts relating to the Summoning Charm in his head. The only description of the experience he could articulate was that it felt as if his brain had somehow caught fire within his skull. A shudder passed

through his entire body, and Harry suspected that if he had not been dilating, that shudder would instead have been a violent full-body spasm or possibly some kind of fit.

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa  
cccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccc  
cccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccc  
iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii  
oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo  
wwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww  
aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa  
nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn  
dddddddddddddddddddddddddddddddddd

### ***Thump-thump - 1000 feet.***

Afraid he would drop the dilation because of the pain if he hesitated any longer (or that the dilation itself would kill him), Harry pressed forward and opened up one final thought-stream: a seventh mind, seven being the most powerful number in Arithmancy. And just like that, the pain suddenly ... *stopped*. Indeed, all sensation stopped. Amy was gone. The broom was gone. The werewolves were gone. The *world* was gone. Every possible distraction was gone. As far as the boy could tell, even his own physical body was gone, though his mind, his sense of self multiplied by seven, remained. The entire universe shrank until it was just the four of them. Harry Potter and his wand and the two words that connected them together. And in that instant, Harry Potter knew the spell.

He. *Knew*. It.

### ***Thump-... - 800 feet.***

Harry released the dilation at the last second before it could kill him, and the world resumed its normal pace. He

also ended the partitioning of his mind, and the seven thought-streams collapsed down to one. The boy focused all of his attention on his wand, and with utter serenity and immaculate precision, he thought two words.

*accio wand*

Instantly, the wand snapped into his waiting hand so forcefully that it stung, and for a brief horrifying instant, he almost dropped it again. Instead, he grasped it tightly and whirled his body around in mid-air, screaming out incantations as he did. "**ACCIO FIREBOLT! ACCIO AMY WILKES!**" By now, the Firebolt was more than 100 feet away when it suddenly froze before rocketing back towards him. Amy was closer, and the girl was yanked away from the werewolf barely a second before he could grab her. With a well-practiced flick of his wrist, Harry retracted his wand into its holster so that he could catch her with both arms. With some difficulty, he managed to turn her around so that she was grabbing him around the neck as if holding onto a life preserver. At no point, did the girl stop screaming in mortal terror. To Harry, the world was an agonizing blur, but he could still sense the general direction of everything around him – the Firebolt, the werewolf, the ground. Legilimency, he assumed.

***600 feet***

Harry shifted Amy with his left arm while reaching out with his right to snag the summoned Firebolt. Bringing the broom in close, he held it against Amy's back so that he put both hands on the shaft. The impact of the broom caused the two children to start spinning wildly in the air as they fell, and on one rotation, Harry noticed that the pursuing werewolf was now speeding towards them, presumably bent on snatching Amy out of his arms before they crashed.



Desperately, he tried to maneuver the broom so he could mount it in mid-air.

### ***300 feet***

After a mad scramble, he finally had the broom properly between his legs. When the pursuer was less than a foot away, Harry kicked the Firebolt into motion, heading straight for the ground. He and Amy were still in a freefall and now accelerating, but at least they were no longer tumbling and were a little bit farther away from the werewolf.

### ***100 feet***

Harry grit his teeth and grasped the handle with both hands as tightly as he could, and with a furious bellow, he wrenched it up with all his might. At less than ten feet from impact, he finally had the broom horizontal to the ground. And just like that, Randolph Spudmore's Redistributed Gravity Charm lived up to its name and reputation as the Firebolt converted Harry's (literally) terminal velocity into horizontal thrust and the broom shot off towards the Forbidden Forest. Now, Amy and Harry were both screaming, the latter because he now realized he would have to navigate through the thick and deadly forest despite having extremely blurred vision and being on the verge of passing out. Briefly, they were joined by a third, deeper scream that was abruptly cut short as the pursuing werewolf slammed into the ground at almost 100 miles per hour. As Harry and Amy entered the woods, the two remaining werewolves watched slack-jawed.

A beat passed before Stavros finally blurted out what was on Fenrir's mind as well. "Who the hell *is this kid?*!"

At that, Greyback finally shook off his amazement and snarled. "After him, you fool!" The two remaining werewolves rocketed towards the forest in pursuit.

Seconds later, Harry was still trying to navigate his way through the Forbidden Forest toward Hogwarts. Amy had finally stopped screaming and had released her death grip on Harry, but she was still obviously terrified. She did however let out a brief shriek when spellfire shattered a branch just a few feet away from them. Harry hissed in anger and sped up as much as he dared.

"Why aren't we going faster?!" Amy exclaimed.

"B-because we ... we're s-still in the w-wrong g-g-gear for carrying a p-passenger," he stammered even as he jerked the broom down to duck under a low-hanging branch just before it shattered from the werewolves' attack. "Also ... I th-think I hurt m'brain."

At that, Amy finally took a good look at the boy who'd saved her and was shocked at his appearance. Harry was deathly pale and shaking violently. There was blood covering the bottom of his face from a nosebleed, and his eyes were glassy, unfocused, and so bloodshot that they were practically crimson. She couldn't imagine how he was even keeping the broom up at all, let alone dodging spells and tree limbs at the same time. Amy looked around wildly before sticking her arm out to point off to the left.

"THAT WAY!" she ordered even as more spells flew past them. At this point, Harry was too exhausted and pained to even argue, and the broom veered sharply off to the left with the werewolves in pursuit. Ten seconds later, Harry suddenly regretted blindly following Amy's directions when he had to quickly jerk the broomstick up to fly over a thick

net of spider webbing. As he proceeded into a region that was increasingly thick with such webs, his eyes widened in horror.

"That was ...! Wha ...! This is the way to the ACROMANTULA COLONY!" he bellowed.

"I KNOW!" replied Amy as she shifted her grip on Harry while drawing out her own wand.

"WHY ARE WE GOING INTO THE ACROMANTULA COLONY?!"

"BECAUSE I DON'T KNOW ANY SPELLS THAT CAN HURT WEREWOLVES!" she yelled in response before pointing her wand towards some approaching trees. "**ARANIA EXUMAI!**"

In response to her incantation and a sharp flick of her wand, a 500-pound acromantula flew out of the tree in an arc over the two to land between them and their pursuers. She fired the same spell off two more times, each with more force and each landing closer to the werewolves. Greyback actually had to swerve to dodge one of them. Finally, on her fourth attempt, the spell struck true. "**ARANIA EXUMAI!**" An enormous spider nearly five feet in diameter flew through the air to land right on top of Stavros. The werewolf let out a gargling scream as he was knocked off his broom and down to the forest floor. The acromantula that landed on him chittered madly and tried to bite him even as the werewolf tore at the creature with his claws. Soon other acromantulas came out of the brush, drawn by the noise and the smell of fresh prey.

With a furious snarl, Fenrir doubled back, blasted the spider off his packmate's body, and then swooped down to grab Stavros before heading back the way they came. He

hoped the younger werewolf would keep his mouth shut when Peter inevitably chewed them both out for somehow losing the primary target to a rescue by the secondary target. If Stavros were to anger Pettigrew enough, it might be less painful for all concerned to have left him for the spiders.

Seconds later, Harry's Firebolt blasted out of the Forest, dipped up to clear Hagrid's hut, and finally came down to what would have been a perfect landing had Harry not finally lost control ... and consciousness. While the two came down at a controlled rate of speed, he blacked out briefly while landing and the two ended up crashing and rolling several feet across the muddy field. Mercifully, they had been going slow enough to avoid injuries, but Harry still looked terrible. Amy quickly pulled herself up, raised her wand, and fired off some fireworks to attract attention and help. Soon, a dozen or so students, including several prefects, were headed their way.

"Harry! Harry!" she exclaimed while shaking the boy. "Are you okay!"

"Fine, fine," he mumbled. "Just ... fried my ... brain-meats." With that he giggled softly at his own joke without even opening his eyes. "Ya'know ... any landin' ya can walk away from 'n all that."

"In case you haven't noticed, you're not walking!" she hissed angrily. "You're a maniac to have done all that!"

"Couldn't be helped," he slurred. "Had'ta save'ya. Made a promise."

The girl shook her head in confusion. "A promise?! Why would you do something that stupid?! And to who?!"

His eyes slowly fluttered open. They still looked blood red, especially against his ghastly pale skin. Despite his awful condition, he gave the girl a dopey grin. "Ken'you keep s-s-s-ecret?" he whispered.

Amy nodded nervously. At Harry's instruction, she bent down and listened to what he whispered in her ear. Then, she jerked back up even as prefects arrived to administer first aid and transport Harry to the Infirmary. As everyone else left, the girl still sat in the mud, watching as Harry Potter was carried off to safety while she absorbed all the shocks the day had brought her.

## Chapter End Notes

Thanks and mutual congratulations to all my wonderful fans and supporters. The Discord page has broken 400 followers, but more importantly, POS now has more than 10,000 followers, on FF.Net! I honestly never imagined back in 2016 that this would turn into such a thing. I only hope POS continues to bring you all enjoyment.

# **Chaos in Hogsmeade (conclusion)**

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### ***CHAPTER 22: Chaos in Hogsmeade (conclusion)***

***From the Daily Prophet - Special Edition***

**THE DEATH EATER MENACE - DAY 91**

**SIRIUS BLACK LEADS WEREWOLVES AND  
DEATH EATERS IN ASSAULT ON HOGSMEADE!**

**SIX DEAD! DOZENS INJURED!**

**BOY-WHO-LIVED AND MINISTER OF MAGIC BOTH  
NARROWLY ESCAPE ASSASSINATION!**

**SPECIAL EYEWITNESS REPORT BY RITA SKEETER  
ON PAGE 2.**

**A Conference Room at the Ministry of Magic**

**31 October 1993**

**6:00 p.m.**

Cornelius Fudge snorted at the newspaper headline. Trust the Daily Prophet to move with lightning speed just when he wanted them to take the day off. He had left the Three Broomsticks by floo not ten minutes before the start of the attack, but there was never a moment he'd been in any real danger. Still, he supposed it wouldn't hurt to have the public concerned for his safety. Every little bit of goodwill helped.

In the debriefing room with him were Chief Auror James Potter and his senior staff, DMLE Director Amelia Bones and her senior staff, Senior Undersecretary Dolores Umbridge ... and an incredibly nondescript man in incredibly nondescript robes who sat in the corner taking notes on behalf of the Unspeakables. Technically, this meeting was outside Umbridge's official portfolio, but the woman had proven herself quite indispensable to Fudge since the Death Eater crisis began, and, particularly relevant to the immediate circumstances, she seemed to have an encyclopedic knowledge about werewolves.

"Alright, let's get on with it," Fudge said. "I'd like to start with your report, James. I know you're eager to get back to Hogwarts and check on your son. If it's possible to finish up early with your business, I'm not averse to you sneaking out before the end of the meeting."

"I appreciate that, Minister," James replied tersely. "But if it's all the same, I'll stay here as long as needed. Lily will be contacting me by Patronus if there's any change in Harry's condition."

With that, Potter opened up the folder in front of him and quickly summarized the information on the Hogsmeade attack that had been collected so far.

"The attack commenced shortly after noon. It was a three-pronged attack. The largest group consisted of eleven individuals wearing homemade Death Eater-styled attire who attacked and destroyed the Hogsmeade Post Office with Blasting Curses. Out of that group, three were killed, but the rest escaped. None of the dead were identified as having been affiliated with You-Know-Who during the last war, though they all had prior criminal records. They appear to have been recruited specifically for this attack.

More importantly, we got their leader, a man Polyjuiced to look like Sirius Black but who was actually revealed to be Janos Skorzeny, a Polish werewolf who belongs to Fenrir Greyback's pack. In addition to this incident, Skorzeny's wanted in several European jurisdictions for dozens of counts of murder, terrorism, and insurrection. At the moment, we're keeping him on ice in a DMLE detention cell until we're ready to begin interrogation. I don't know how much we'll get from him since werewolves are resistant to Veritaserum and Legilimency, but it's worth a shot."

"Do we know why Skorzeny was Polyjuiced to look like Black?" asked Director Bones. "And a young Sirius Black at that?"

"Not yet. Our current working theory is that Black is still recuperating from Azkaban and is too weak to engage in public activities, so the people who freed him are using Polyjuice to cause confusion and panic among the wizarding populace. We have no idea why the fake Sirius Black looked so young. Perhaps a defect in the Polyjuice Potion."

James flipped a page in his notes. "The second prong consisted of Fenrir himself along with five other werewolves who attacked the Three Broomsticks with the apparent goal of kidnaping the young fiancée of Tiberius Nott, a girl named Amaryllis Wilkes who is also the only offspring of the late Erasmus and Linnea Wilkes, both marked Death Eaters. The werewolves' goal in capturing the Wilkes girl is as yet unknown. We assume ransom at this point. However, we did manage to capture three of them. A fourth was killed during an attempt to pursue my son Harry after he successfully rescued Wilkes from their initial attack."

"The third prong of the attack was the most mysterious. It seems that persons unknown using an as-yet-unidentified



curse destroyed the Tonks Clinic with some modified form of Fiendfyre. A side effect of the curse also caused an outbreak of uncontrolled violence among nearby villagers. That's actually where most of the casualties came from. Five civilians were inside the Post Office when it blew, though thankfully no Hogwarts students, and one of the auror trainees on-site was killed in the subsequent spellfire exchange. But most of the non-fatal injuries were simply the result of a small riot that broke out near the Clinic."

"If you would, get me a copy of the file on the trainee who was killed," Fudge said quietly. "I'd like to write a letter of condolence to the family."

James nodded and made a note of the request.

"Do we know what sort of curse was used?" Bones inquired.

"Not one I've ever heard of," the Chief Auror answered while glancing towards the nondescript man taking notes. "Unspeakable Croaker was ... evasive when I asked the same question."

With that remark, all eyes turned towards the man who simply looked up with a bland expression. "The investigation by the Department of Mysteries is ongoing," he said simply and without further elaboration.

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### ***Meanwhile in the Hogwarts Infirmary***

Severus Snape scowled angrily around the room and reminded himself of why he hated Halloween. "Werewolves," he thought ruefully. "*During a Hogsmeade Weekend! Obscene!*"

Thankfully, he had already completed his Legilimency probe of Rodolphus Lestrangle by the time of the attack. The psychic interrogation of Lestrangle had yielded little they didn't already know. The chalice which Voldemort had given to Bellatrix was definitely the Hufflepuff Cup and was almost certainly a horcrux, but Rodolphus knew nothing of her security arrangements for it. Apparently, while Bellatrix's brainwashing compelled her to submit to Rodolphus (and occasionally Rabastan) in all sorts of sordid ways, not even he could command her to reveal what the Dark Lord had ordered hidden. It appeared that Snape would have no choice but to legitimize Bellatrix herself despite all the risks that entailed. The conspirators agreed that he would make the attempt over the Christmas break and spend the time between now and then reviewing Rookwood's Occlumency text for clues as to Bellatrix's psychic defenses.

The only other significant information gleaned from Rodolphus's memories pertained to the Barty Crouch Jr. matter. The most interesting detail was that none of the Lestranges knew of Crouch's personal involvement in the Longbottom attack until their trial. Rodolphus only knew the man under the codename Mr. January, as he was part of a different Death Eater cell. And in the guise of Mr. January, Crouch contacted the Lestranges on November 2, 1981 to propose the assault on Longbottom Manor for which he was able to provide a warding bypass. He was wearing Death Eater apparel when he arrived to join the attack, and he remained masked until after his arrest. Lucius and Regulus each proposed to investigate that issue the best they could between now and Christmas. Crouch had claimed innocence at trial, but his hysterical denials offered no explanation for the Dark Mark on his arm.

But those concerns fell to the side when Albus's phoenix Patronus unexpectedly arrived to deliver the news about Hogsmeade and to ask Snape to return at once to Hogwarts where Madam Pomfrey would likely need some assistance. Only one student had actually been injured in the Hogsmeade attack – and naturally it was one of the Potter Twins – but a great many students had been present at the time, and Pomfrey would likely need far more Calming Draughts than were on hand.

Hours later, his emergency brewing complete, Snape convened in the infirmary where Sensible Potter was lying in bed comatose. Also present were Dumbledore, Lily Potter and her Other Son, the Sensible Potter's solicitor, and (surprisingly) Alastor Moody and Malachi Sturgeon. Upon arrival, Moody gave the former Death Eater a brief glare of disdain but said nothing. The Caretaker, on the other hand, gave a look that oddly implied a sense of familiarity even though Snape had exchanged barely a dozen words with the man since his hiring.

"I've completed my assessment of Mr. Potter," the mediwitch said. "Let me begin by saying that had I my preference, Mr. Potter would be at St. Mungo's now, but Mr. Podmore vetoed that idea most strenuously."

Artie raised his chin in response to the implied rebuke. "As I said earlier, Madam Pomfrey, in light of the circumstances that led to my client's injuries, I feel that absent compelling reasons otherwise, it would be safer for him to remain here behind the wards of Hogwarts rather than be sent to a large hospital where the security is not as tight." Naturally, Harry's other reasons for not wishing to be examined by specialists at the wizarding hospital were left unspoken.

"Hmmf," Pomfrey said with a sniff. "Be that as it may, Mr. Potter is now stabilized and in a healing coma. But it was touch and go for several hours, and if there are any negative changes in his condition, I will transfer him to St. Mungo's regardless of your preferences, Mr. Podmore. If it comes down to it, you can just sue me or something."

"Fair enough," Artie said with a nod.

"What happened to Mr. Potter, Poppy?" Dumbledore asked. "Do we know what curse was used against him?"

"No, which is why I wanted him in the spell damage ward to begin with. His symptoms are most peculiar. If I didn't know better, I'd say he'd been subjected to significant Cruciatus exposure." At that, Lily gasped in horror. "But there appears to be no impairment to his body's nervous system. All the neural shock was focused on his brain, and that's not how the Crucio works. I believe he will remain comatose for several days, and I can perform a more thorough neural analysis when he wakes up. If he does not wake up relatively soon, I will consider other treatment options. I'm afraid that's all I can say at this time."

After answering a few more question, Pomfrey shooed everyone out of the Infirmary. Moody was the last to leave, and when everyone was gone, he turned back to the mediwitch. "Tell me, Poppy, among the tests you performed on the boy, did you do a Lubinsky-Chang assessment?"

She crooked a suspicious eyebrow. "And why, pray tell, would I do that, Alastor?"

He gave an evasive shrug. "Just an idea. You should consider it. Might be important."

She folded her arms. "Alastor, what do you know about my patient and how do you know it?"

Moody sighed and gave her a jagged smile. "Poppy, please. Just trust me? For old time's sake?" And then, he gave her a wink with his one good eye, and she blushed slightly at the remembrance of her crush from decades before on the man who was once the cutest boy in Hufflepuff House.

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***The Astronomy Tower***  
***7:30 p.m.***

It had taken Hermione half an hour after supper to find Theo No-Name at the top of the Astronomy Tower. The boy hadn't been at dinner which she found worrying. She'd intended to check with Blaise to see if the other boy knew where he might be, but she'd gotten waylaid by Lavender Brown who hugged her nearly to unconsciousness while gushing madly about her "prophetic gifts." Apparently, Lavender was now utterly convinced that she would have died or else been turned into a werewolf had Hermione not warned her away from Hogsmeade. Never mind that it was a juvenile prank on Hermione's part meant to take advantage of Lavender's credulity. Or that Hermione was quite certain Lavender would have come to no harm even if she had gone to Hogsmeade since Harry Potter was the only one at all to suffer any injuries from the day's events. No, Hermione was a *Seeress* now (with a capital S), and nothing she could say or do would persuade Lavender or indeed the majority of Gryffindor House otherwise. In fact, Lavender was now talking about having Hermione visit Brown Manor over the Christmas break to perform "readings" for all her relatives, a prospect that left Hermione utterly horrified.

When she made it to the top of the tower, she found Theo sitting next to one of the open windows with his knees pulled up against his chest. From his vantage point, it was possible to still see the still-smoking ruins of the Tonks Clinic by the fading light of the evening sun. The boy looked utterly morose.

"Theo?" she said gently.

He glanced over to her and then turned back away. "How's Harry?" he asked.

She came closer. "No change. He's expected to be in a healing coma for some time." She hesitated. "I didn't see you at dinner. Have you eaten?"

"M'fine," he said without looking at her. "Not hungry."

"Theo, you need to eat something. You didn't eat anything this afternoon either."

He snorted. "Well of course not! You *know* why our lunch plans got interrupted! Somebody sent *hellfire* after The Outcast and burned down his foster family's home!"

"Theo, what happened today wasn't your fault!"

The boy snorted. "I'm pretty sure I counted at least twenty '*Die, Outcast, Die!*' messages burned into the walls that said otherwise, Hermione."

"You weren't the one to burn them though, Theo. You were the intended victim, not the perpetrator."

"Yeah, exactly. And I'm getting very tired of feeling like the victim all the time. But on the bright side, I didn't get maimed for life or lose the home I grew up in like Ted or

Dora. I didn't get ... b-burned to death like ..." He looked away, suddenly overcome with emotion. He sniffled as he wiped away the fresh tears.

She reached down and put a hand on his shoulder. "Theo, what happened to Iris was a terrible tragedy, I know. But as for the rest, homes can be rebuilt, and the injuries Ted experienced can be healed."

*"Well, I hope they can be healed,"* the girl thought to herself. She still wasn't entirely sure what Ron Weasley had done – and with Parseltongue no less! – but it would be amazing if Ted could be fully healed from Fiendfyre burns.

"Anyway, you can't blame yourself for those things. Blame the Death Eaters and werewolves who were truly responsible." She glanced down out of the Astronomy window to the courtyard far below still illuminated by the dying sunset. "Come down with me, Theo. You shouldn't be up here all alone."

"Why?" he said harshly as he shrugged her hand off his shoulder. "Afraid I'll do something stupid? Something to put everyone out of my misery? Maybe I should."

Hermione didn't respond at first. Instead, she simply moved over to the other side of the window, dropped her book bag, and slid her back down the wall into a seating position. For a long while, they said nothing but simply watched the sunset together.

"A friend of my killed himself not long ago," she finally said. Theo looked up suddenly in surprise.

"Who...?"

"You wouldn't know him," she said while still staring off into the night sky. "He was someone ... from back home. He also ... had a difficult home life and felt that there was no one there for him. And when he reached out to me ... I wasn't there for him either. I was too wrapped up in my own issues to realize how much he was hurting. How alone he felt."

She turned back to Theo. "I would do anything to undo that mistake. I never again want to feel like I let my any of my friends down by not being there when they needed help. Or by failing to let them know how much they are loved even if they don't know it. And how much they'd be missed if they were gone."

Theo stared speechless at the girl for several seconds before he had to look away. "Hermione ... look. I'm sorry about your friend. And ... I'm sorry I've been so ... mooney lately. I promise I won't do anything foolish up here. And I do know I have good friends. You and Harry and Blaise and others. It's just ... I don't see how those friends can be enough when it feels like the whole world is against me."

Hermione absorbed that silently for a moment before her eyes lit up. "Theo, have you picked out a book for your Muggle Studies book report assignment yet?"

Theo did a double-take at the change of topic. "Uh, no. Why?"

Hermione quickly opened her bag and pulled out a paperback book. "I think you should do this one. I was going to, but it seems unfair to the other students to choose something I read years before and consider one of my favorite books. But I think you should do it. It'll be a good fit for you."

"What's it about?" he asked.



"Rabbits."

"... *rabbits*?"

"Rabbits," she said firmly while flipping through the book. When she found a certain page, she tapped it with her wand to magically highlight a particular passage. Then, she folded down the corner of the page so it would be easy to find.

"Woah! Hermione Granger defacing a book!" Theo said with mock surprise. "Will wonders never cease."

"Well it is my own personal copy of this book. And besides, it's paperback. They're expendable."

She handed the book over. And then, for good measure, she pulled a chocolate bar from her bag and handed that over as well. "Eat this tonight, but tomorrow, I want to see you at breakfast."

Theo snickered softly. "Yes, mother." With that, Hermione rose and headed towards the exit, while Theo turned towards the marked passage. As he read over the passage, for a brief instant, he found himself mildly hurt at what he was reading. But as he continued, his eyes widened and the beginnings of a smile crept over the corners of his mouth. He looked up at the girl who was watching him with a hopeful expression.

"Good night, Theo," she said with a wave.

Theo waved back, and his smile was genuine. "Good night, Hermione. I'll see you tomorrow."

As Hermione left the tower, Theo read the marked passage one more time before flipping back to start the book from

the beginning.

***All the world will be your enemy, Prince of a  
Thousand Enemies.  
And when they catch you, they will kill you.  
But first, they must catch you,  
digger, listener, runner, prince with the swift warning.  
Be cunning and full of tricks, and your people will  
never be destroyed.  
— Watership Down, Richard Adams***

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***An abandoned shack in the woods  
Approximately 200 miles south of Hogwarts  
11:30 p.m.***

"*Explanations!*" Peter demanded in a fury. "Will someone kindly tell me how a group of highly trained and experienced werewolf-mercenaries following a meticulously organized plan two months in the making somehow managed to get their arses handed to them by a thirteen-year-old boy, a Muggle Studies teacher, and *the sodding Hogwarts Caretaker?!*"

Stavros Skorzeny growled angrily, but Fenrir Greyback merely sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know what the Caretaker's deal is, Pettigrew, but I'm here to tell you – there's more to the Potter boy than meets the eye. I mean, he's just a kid and is already doing wandless magic! That's not normal."

Peter scoffed. "Impossible. There's no way the little brat can do wandless magic at thirteen! It must have been accidental magic!"

"Then it was *damned convenient* accidental magic, Peter. And that's something we weren't prepared for. Just as we

weren't prepared for that Mudblood bitch slinging curses I've never heard of and also shooting off a *fully corporeal Patronus!*"

The rat animagus bit off the scathing reply that had been on the tip of his tongue. To be honest, it seemed like everything that could have gone wrong did. He'd gotten a summary out of Prongs earlier after he'd returned Jim to the school. First, Harry *Bloody* Potter had staged a daring rescue of the Wilkes whelp right out of Fenrir's grasp. Then, Lily had shown up with that Patronus she'd been so proud of back in Fifth Year. He'd known that werewolves were vulnerable to the Patronus, but he'd never realized they were *that* vulnerable. And then, the runic array that he'd pulled out of the remains of Mr. Toymaker's arsenal had failed to live up to its reputation and collapsed far sooner than he'd expected. But the cherry on top was the mysterious Caretaker, Malachi Sturgeon, who apparently dropped literally out of the sky to take down Janos Skorzeny with some kind of strange martial arts attack and, in the process, reveal Pettigrew's deception about Sirius Black. James had no idea who Sturgeon was and was highly suspicious of him, but Dumbledore himself spoke up for the man personally when he arrived at Hogsmeade just after the attack ended. That was enough for James to drop the issue for the time being.

"What about the four pack members who were captured?" he asked, changing the subject. "What do they know – particularly about *me*? And will they break under interrogation?"

Fenrir shook his head. "No. Only Janos knew your real name or even what you really look like. And he can resist Legilimency and Veritaserum."

"So all I have to worry about is him *voluntarily* giving me up to stay out of Azkaban," Peter grouched.

"You underestimate the pack bond, Pettigrew. The curse binds my pack to me through the magic of dominance and submission. I am Janos's alpha, and I have charged him with keeping our secrets unto death. He will not betray us."

"No, he will not," Stavros said hotly. "But will we betray him? How are we going to rescue him from the DMLE?"

"We are not going to do anything of the sort!" Peter snapped. "Your brother knew the risks as well as the penalty for failure. When our Lord returns, he will be rescued from Azkaban and handsomely rewarded for his devotion to our cause. Provided that the pack bond Fenrir speaks of is as strong as you all claim ... and that the idiot isn't dumb enough to be tricked into giving away information despite the bond. His capture by a glorified janitor doesn't speak well for his competence after all."

"ENOUGH!" Stavros roared. "Fenrir! Why do you just stand there and let him speak of my brother that way!" He snarled at Peter and flexed his clawed hands. "Who are you to speak to any werewolf that way, you pathetic little *wizard*?"

Peter crooked an eyebrow at the outburst before calmly walking straight up to Stavros, completely unafraid even though the partially-transformed werewolf was almost a foot taller. Nearby, Fenrir closed his eyes and began rubbing his forehead with his hand.

"Who am *I*?" the wizard asked mildly. "Who am *I* to speak to a werewolf in whatever manner I choose?" He smiled broadly, and Stavros was suddenly struck by how unusually pointed the man's teeth now seemed to be.

Outside, a flock of birds that had been nesting for the night in the nearby woods suddenly took frightened wing in response to the screams that echoed out of the shack and across the forest.

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***The Hogwarts Infirmary***  
***3:25 a.m.***

Though the hour was late, the Infirmary was not fully dark. The stars were bright out tonight and the moon was more than half-full, and their combined light shown through the windows well enough to see clearly. No one saw or heard James Potter as he entered and made his way to the bed where his eldest son lay comatose. Illuminated by starlight, Harry looked pale but peaceful, as if he were merely slumbering instead of recovering from a near-death experience. The boy's father was exhausted from the stresses of the day, but he knew he would not be able to sleep until he saw Harry in person. For several minutes, he simply stood at the foot of the bed as if waiting for his son to open his eyes, while years worth of regret over his failures raged in his gut.

"Come back to us, Harry," he finally said in a whisper.  
"Come back to us, and I promise I'll fix things. Whatever it takes, I'll make things right."

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***1 November 1993***  
***The Potions Classroom***  
***6:00 p.m.***

Hermione entered the classroom with a mix of trepidation and annoyance. Trepidation because she had no idea why Professor Snape had sent her a message at lunch informing

her that she had a three-hour detention with him that evening. Annoyance because after her detention was over, she still had several hours of homework waiting, and between her heavy class load and the stress of the weekend's events, she was completely exhausted. If things continued like this, she might have to pay another visit to Clarence Smith, the snooty Ravenclaw Sixth Year who discreetly sold black market Pepper-Up Potions to over-achievers like Hermione who seemed to have more intellectual curiosity and ambition than common sense.

As she passed through the doorway, however, the girl stopped short in surprise. All the furniture normally found in the Potions classroom had been cleared away, leaving only a small table – a gurney, actually – upon which rested what appeared to be a man's body. On closer inspection, though, she recognized it as the dummy that Professor Lockhart had used the previous year for his First Aid lessons. A very realistic dummy, she recalled, as the fake blood it produced when cut open made several people in her class sick. Professor Snape stood on the other side.

"Come in, Miss Granger, and close the door behind you."

She did so, and he immediately sent a powerful locking spell followed by a silencing charm.

"I apologize for the deception of giving you a detention, but I require a certain amount of discretion for what I now propose to do with you."

"Do ... *with* me, Professor?" she asked nervously.

He nodded. "In light of yesterday's events, I wish to teach you two spells which might be of use to you in the future. One of them is a spell of my own design which, frankly, a great many people would consider dark magic. Accordingly,

if you agree to learn this spell, I must ask that you also take a vow of secrecy regarding who taught it to you. I would also hope that you will show the greatest discretion both in using it and in teaching it to others. It is not a spell that should be widely disseminated, though I do plan to share it with Harry Potter upon his recovery, as well as certain others who have shown both the skill and maturity needed to master it while respecting its dangers. The spell's name, which you may remember from a previous discussion we had last year, is ... *Sectumsempra*."

Hermione's eyes widened. She had begun a cursory study of that spell from the notes she'd found in her dorm that she later learned had been stolen from Snape during his student days. He'd warned her off the spell then, saying the notes were incomplete, but he'd never said anything about the spell being *dark*. She also wondered just how bad the spell could be for Snape himself to consider it dark magic.

"I see you do recall the name," Snape noted. "When last we spoke on the topic, I told you that the spell notes you had were incomplete and that you might end up seriously injuring or killing someone if you attempted it. What I did not say ... is that doing so is the spell's intended function. I created *Sectumsempra* for purposes of *maiming and killing*."

Hermione found herself speechless. This was not a conversation she ever expected to have with a teacher. Not even this teacher.

"Before I will teach you *Sectumsempra*, however, you will learn a different spell with a more practical purpose, not to mention a more socially acceptable pedigree. *Vulnera Sanentur* is an extremely powerful healing Charm capable of repairing even the deepest cuts and gashes, including

internal bleeding. It too is a spell of my own design, though unlike my other personal curses, I have willingly shared it with Madam Pomfrey and others. It is a useful Charm to know under any circumstances, but it is vital to know before any study of Sectumsempra, as wounds inflicted with the latter cannot be healed with any lesser healing Charm. Absent a swift application of Vulnera Sanentur, any injuries resulting from Sectumsempra that are more than superficial will inevitably bleed out, resulting in the victim's death."

The girl was suitably horrified. "Professor, why would you want me to learn a spell like that?! One that would be lethal without a special healing Charm to counteract it?!"

A strange furious light entered Snape's eyes. "Because yesterday's events have shown it to be necessary, Miss Granger," he said with some anger. "You see, I designed Sectumsempra for use in *killing werewolves!*"

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***From The Essential Defence Against the Dark Arts by Arsenius Jigger (p. 394)***

It is important to note that lycanthropes (werewolves in the vulgar parlance) are not a natural phenomenon nor truly magical creatures, despite political efforts to categorize them as either Beings or Beasts. Each werewolf was originally a human being, whether magical or Muggle, who was subjected to the Lycanthropic Curse. In modern times, this invariably means surviving an attack by a werewolf in his fully transformed state, as the original Lycanthropic Curse has been lost since the death of its creator.

That creator was the notorious 14th century Dark Lord named Emeric Belasco but who has been christened by



history as "Emeric the Evil," a name he proudly bore during his relatively lengthy career. Emeric was of Bavarian descent but entered Hogwarts (the only European magical school at the time) in 1340 where he was sorted into Gryffindor. A brash but brilliant student, Emeric was, among other gifts, a natural animagus who spontaneously developed the power to transform into the shape of a small dog, possibly a Crup, around the age of thirteen. Natural animagery (i.e. the spontaneous development of an animagus form without the use of any rituals or training exercises, usually during the onset of puberty) was more common in Europe in those days as it remains today in Africa and parts of East Asia, though it became increasingly rare among Europeans and unheard of in Britain in the last two centuries.

Apparently unhappy with his animagus form, Emeric spent the first decade or so post-graduation researching animagery and other aspects of human transfiguration in hopes of learning a new and more impressive form, but by all accounts, the animagus form, once acquired, is immutable. However, Emeric's research into the animagus gift bore terrible fruit in other ways. Through dark experiments and rituals, Emeric devised a curse that would permanently impose a form of uncontrolled animagery on the targeted victim. The first successful (for some definitions of the word) experiments resulted in the Apocalypse Pack, the thirteen original werewolves from whom all modern werewolves claim descent, as anyone who survived being bitten or scratched by one of the Apocalypse Pack would inevitably become lycanthropes themselves and be able to pass on that curse similarly to others.

The means by which the Curse functions is still unclear as of this writing, but its properties are well-known. When a human being is infected with Lycanthropy, he immediately

becomes physically stronger and tougher, while gaining heightened auditory and olfactory senses. The victim also heals at an accelerated rate, though the werewolf cannot regenerate damage post mortem and thus return to life as trolls can. These traits are present at all times. But more importantly – and more infamously – on one night each month when the moon is at its fullest and the sun has set, the victim will uncontrollably transform into a human-wolf hybrid. In this inhuman form, the werewolf's strength, speed, and durability all increase even more, and the creature gains powerful claws capable of slicing through bone. A transformed werewolf also generates a powerful "fear aura" which most humans find debilitating.

However, the transformed werewolf's intellect is diminished to that of a wild, nearly rabid animal which has an instinctual predisposition for human flesh over all other food sources. While a werewolf can eat animal flesh (and will in the absence of human meat), a transformed werewolf will always pursue human prey over animal prey. The one exception to this general rule is animagi – due to some facet of the curse, whether intentional or accidental, a transformed werewolf will almost never show aggression towards a transformed animagus unless seriously provoked. Indeed, the literature is replete with stories of animagi successfully fighting off werewolves and even herding them away from human prey. Furthermore, it is well established that an animagus, whether transformed or not, is immune to the Lycanthropic Curse and cannot contract lycanthropy under any recorded circumstances. Likely this has something to do with the manner in which Emeric used his own animagus gift as a template for the curse, as it was known that Emeric could exercise some degree of control even over fully transformed werewolves, though their limited intelligence and uncontrollable rage made them poor servants.

Initially, a newly infected werewolf retains his full human intelligence and personality except on the night of the full moon. However, upon infection, the werewolf soon develops a series of psychological disorders endemic to the curse. Initially, these disorders manifest as bouts of uncontrollable anger, loss of human socialization skills, and a strong preference for meat over other foodstuffs. As the curse fully takes hold, these disorders worsen into extreme sociopathy, cannibalistic tendencies, a propensity for sadism, and an inability to view non-werewolves as anything other than prey animals and/or toys. When a werewolf has reached this level of psychological degradation, he gains the power to intentionally assume a transitional state in which he remains essentially human in form, but grows larger and more hirsute, and develops claws which, while not capable of transmitting the curse, are still quite deadly. This process of degradation is considered irreversible, and most infected werewolves will completely abandon all human morals and constraints in as little as one month after infection or as long as a year. It is theorized that the length of time before complete degradation is influenced primarily by the number of human victims killed and eaten during transformation. Interestingly, the process of degradation may also be accelerated simply by remaining in the company of other werewolves. All lycanthropes have a powerful pack instinct and tend to organize themselves into stable social groups with the most powerful member gaining the status of "pack alpha" and with it a degree of control over the rest of the pack. Solitary werewolves tend to lose their grip on their humanity at a somewhat slower rate.

Stories about the supposed weaknesses of werewolves abound. While Muggle legends about werewolves suggest that they are particularly vulnerable to silver, this is naught but myth. Few Muggle weapons can have any meaningful

effect on a fully transformed werewolf, and in fact, most spells are ineffective as well due to the creatures incredibly swift regenerative properties. Naturally, the Killing Curse is as effective against a werewolf as it is against any other living thing, but it remains Unforgivable even in the case of werewolf attacks, though during the time of Emeric's activity, those wizarding societies at greatest risk from his werewolf armies sometimes sanctioned the use of the Killing Curse to slay werewolves. Werewolves also have some vulnerability to the Patronus Charm – the mist form can disorient and bewitch werewolves while a true Patronus can inflict physical damage that does not heal with the creature's usual swiftness. More conventional combat Charms are only effective if used en masse by multiple wizards working in tandem to inflict damage faster than the werewolf can heal it.

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### ***Sometime later ...***

It was a lazy November afternoon that found Harry Potter sitting under a tree near Black Lake, watching contentedly as the Giant Squid waved a tentacle in his direction. Harry waved back before looking around. He'd been here for a while but had seen no sign of anyone else, student or teacher. Just him and the Squid, apparently. He frowned at that, but then shrugged. For some reason, it didn't seem important.

As the Squid frolicked in the lake, Harry pulled out his trusty wand and examined it. He'd always been immaculately careful with the holly and phoenix wand since the day he'd bought it, but somehow it seemed as if he were only just now seeing it as it really was. Only now was he hyper-aware of every whorl, eddy, and indentation on the wand's surface. With a smile, he tossed the wand up into

the air and then flexed his fingers slightly. Instantly, the wand snapped back into his hand. He did that a few more times before pulling his arm back and hurling the wand towards the lake. Then, just before it could hit the water, he gave his wand hand the tiniest twitch. Again, the wand rocketed back into his waiting hand.

Harry smiled and studied the wand some more with a curious expression. "Curious, very curious. That's what Ollivander said." Harry tossed the wand up into the air once again, but this time, instead of summoning it back into his palm, he extended his forefinger. The wand landed on the finger and rested there in perfect balance. He moved his hand around experimentally, but the wand never fell off his finger. Then, he eyed the wand speculatively and focused his concentration on it. Slowly at first, the wand began to spin around in a circle centered on his finger. Faster and faster it spun until it rose up off the forefinger to hover about an inch above it like a helicopter's blades. Harry chuckled and then unclenched his other fingers. The wand's rotation ceased instantly, and once more, it snapped back into his palm.

"That's a neat trick," said a bright voice from behind him, startling the boy into giving out a small yelp. It was Luna Lovegood.

"Luna!" Harry said happily. "How are you today? And by any chance do you know where everybody else is?"

"I'm fine, Harry Potter," she said as sat down on the grass next to him. "I imagine everyone else is in class since it's the middle of the day. I had a free period, so I decided to take a short nap. That's when I saw you out here. How are you feeling?"

Harry shrugged. "Not bad, although I do feel a bit ... befuddled. Like my brain is a bit fuzzy."

"Well, that's to be expected, Harry Potter. You are in a coma after all."

"Oh, well I guess that makes ... sorry, *I'm in a what now?*"

"A coma. It's a state of profound unconsciousness caused by disease, injury, or poison. You've been in one since Saturday afternoon. I've been looking for you ever since, but, silly me, I never thought to look outside of the school. I should have remembered that this spot is one of your safe spaces."

"Oooo-kay. I don't feel like I'm in a coma."

"Well, don't just take my word for it," she replied before turning her head to the lake. "*Mr. Squid!* If this is a dream, would you please slap the water three times with a tentacle?" And to Harry's amazement, a huge tentacle rose up out of the water and did just that.

"Huh. So ... I'm ... in a coma. Interesting." He frowned momentarily at his own lack of concern before deciding that he was probably on pain relievers in the waking world.

"*Assuming, of course, that this conversation is actually even happening,*" he thought before deciding to accept his unusual placidity as just one more thing to deal with later.

"And this is a dream, I guess? Are you really even here?"

She nodded. "You had a dream about me. And I had a dream about you. Which was convenient for us both, I think. I've been wanting to talk to you for some time, Harry, but for some reason, it keeps slipping my mind."

"What did you want to talk about?" he asked hesitantly.

She paused as if looking for a diplomatic way to say it before shrugging and choosing directness. "I think there's something horrible in Slytherin House."

He laughed. "Well, probably so. I mean, it is Slytherin House, after all."

She shook her head. "No, I don't mean the normal horrors of hate, greed, and fear. It's a more specifically horrible ... horrible. But for some reason, I keep forgetting to tell you about it when I'm awake. Which only makes it even more concerning, I'm afraid." She pulled her legs into her chest and wrapped her arms around them as if chilled. "I mean, I usually forget all my dreams no matter how much I try to remember. But I'm pretty sure this is something I know when I'm awake, but I never seem to think about it."

He nodded as if to absorb that odd statement, but then, he suddenly sat up straighter. "Was it something to do with the Carrow twins?" he asked.

Luna's eyes brightened. "Yes! Yes, it was! I can't believe I just forgot about them. Of course, since the Sorting, I haven't really seen them anywhere since then since we're in different years." Then, she grimaced. "Or if I have, I've forgotten those sightings as well. Why did you ask about them?"

"Well, I remember seeing your expression at their Sorting and thought it was worth looking into, so I made a mental note to ask you what was so disturbing about them." He blinked twice. "And then, I completely forgot all about it myself. Which, now that I think about it, is wildly out of character for me."

Luna nodded in sympathy. "Well maybe you'll have better luck than me and remember that they're important when you wake up. This is the first time I've thought about them since the night of the Opening Feast ... that I recall anyway."

"So what was so wrong with the Carrows that it gave you that reaction upon seeing them? Their nargles and wreckspurts?"

"Wrackspurts. And they didn't even have any of those which is slightly odd in and of itself, but not that odd if they were both well-adjusted and had no reasons for being angry or unhappy at the time. And their nargles didn't look particularly strange, though very different from most of the ones I see in other people. No, what bothered me was that their nargles move together in perfect synchronicity. *Perfect* synchronicity."

"Well, they are identical twins, Luna."

"So are you and Jim. And Fred and George. And the Patil sisters. None of you are as in tune as the Carrows. It's almost as if ..."

"What?" Harry asked.

She turned to him and shivered slightly. "It's almost as if they have the *same mind* that is somehow present in two separate bodies."

Harry shivered himself at that before changing the subject slightly. "You said their ... nargles looked unusual. In what way? What do nargles even look like?"

"I'm not entirely sure I should answer that, Harry. Knowing too much about the things I see ... well, most people seem to find it disturbing."



Harry crooked an eyebrow. "I think I can handle it," he said confidently.

Luna stared at him for a few seconds. Then, she shrugged and reached over to touch Harry's left temple with a finger. Harry jerked back instinctively and shook his head. Then, his eyes widened. The colors of his dreamscape suddenly faded slightly as if everything around him was no longer real, but just a movie being projected onto a faded canvass. And then, he could see the things moving behind the canvass ... which itself grew thinner and thinner before fading away to allow him to see the creatures clearly. Harry looked around wildly at the sea of ... *things*, some small, some big, and some *massive*. Then, with a feeling of dread, he slowly looked down at his own body to witness the things that were somehow swimming around inside his body. Harry opened his mouth to draw in a terrified breath ...

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***The Hogwarts Infirmary***  
***4 November 1993 (Wednesday)***  
***1:30 p.m.***

"GAAAAH!"

From her nearby desk, Madam Pomfrey jumped in surprise at the sound of a scream from her only patient, one who she'd expected to remain in a healing coma for several more days at least. She ran to Harry's bedside, her wand already drawn. The boy's scream had already ceased, and he was now sitting upright in bed, panting as if he'd just run a race.

"Mr. Potter, lie back down at once! You've suffered serious injuries, and I don't want you to harm yourself any further."

The boy looked around for a few seconds before accepting that he was (a) alive, (b) awake, and (c) in the Infirmary. Slowly, he did as the matron asked. He started to speak but quickly realized that his mouth wasn't working quite right.

"W-what ... what day ... is it?" he got out before a coughing fit set in.

"It is Wednesday in the afternoon. You have been in a healing coma for about four days." Pomfrey conjured a glass of water and carefully helped him to drink it.

"H-h-how's Amy?"

Madam Pomfrey was slightly taken aback that nearly the boy's first thought was to ask about someone else. "Miss Wilkes is quite alright. She suffered nothing more than a few superficial bruises from your landing and was released within thirty minutes. To be perfectly honest, I am amazed at your recovery even after four days." She paused. "You screamed when you awoke. Are you in any pain?"

He shook his head. "Not really. Just ... sore. I woke up from ... a nightmare ... I think." He frowned as he tried to remember.

*"What was I dreaming about when I woke up? Something ... about Luna?"* But the memory of his nightmare refused to come. He was left only with the firm impression that it was something important that was lost to him now. Something he would need to recover sooner rather than later.

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### ***Later that evening ...***

After several hours of medical assessment and a nap enforced with a Sleeping Draught, Madam Pomfrey finally

declared Harry Potter fit enough to receive visitors, although she informed him to his dismay that he would not be fit enough to fly in the Gryffindor-Slytherin season opener that had been scheduled for the following Saturday. In fact, the match itself had been rescheduled with the Hufflepuffs taking the Slytherin team's place.

After the mediwitch left, Harry looked around and noticed that the bedside table was covered with flowers, candy gifts, and get-well cards. Apparently, word of his recovery had spread quickly during his nap. His wand and glasses were also on the table just out of reach. Harry looked around the room to make sure he was alone. Then, he cautiously held up a hand and focused his attention on the wand. Instantly, it flew into his hand. Harry smiled in satisfaction. Then, he focused his attention on his glasses to see if he could summon them as well. The glasses defiantly sat in their place, however. He shrugged and pointed his wand at them, intending to say "Accio Glasses," but to his surprise, the glasses flew into his hand just from the merest wand movement without him even saying the incantation. Then, for some inscrutable reason, he spent several minutes unsuccessfully trying to balance his wand on the tip of his finger before giving up and summoning a Chocolate Frog instead.

Over the next hour, most of his friends came in to give him their good wishes, though the mediwitch refused to allow more than two student visitors at a time and for no more than ten minutes each. James and Lily Potter also came for a longer visit (with a grumbling Severus Snape in tow). Both of them seemed simultaneously distraught at his injury, proud of his "Gryffindorish" courage in saving Amy, and deliriously happy that he was alive and recovering.

Lily also took what Harry thought was an odd interest in the nature of Harry's friendship with Amy Wilkes. He got the vague impression that his mother was worried that he and Amy were romantically attached or something along those lines and that she perhaps disapproved of the Toymaker's daughter dating her firstborn, but she seemed perfectly fine when Harry made it clear that he had no interest in Amy of that kind. For his part, James seemed ill-at-ease (even by his usual standards of "Harry interactions"), as if there were things he wanted to say to the boy but could not bring himself to utter aloud. Jim was also present, and he seemed both in awe of how Harry had evaded the werewolves to save Amy Wilkes and embarrassed by how he'd been removed against his will from the scene by Peter Pettigrew.

The Potters were his last official visitors for the evening, as Madam Pomfrey firmly announced that Harry needed rest and that visiting hours would not resume until the next morning. As Jim was leaving, he turned back to Harry and said "See ya later" with an obvious wink. Harry smiled and shook his head. It seemed that a "No Visitors" sign meant little to a Gryffindor with an Invisibility Cloak.

Soon after, a house elf brought Harry his evening meal along with a copy of today's Daily Prophet. While tucking in, he decided reviewed his various get-well messages first. One in particular caught his eye, as it was a bulky package from Professor Scrimgeour. Inside was a thick set of bound papers with a cover that read "*Wizengamot vs. Sirius Black, November 4, 1981.*" There was also a short handwritten message on the DADA professor's personal stationary.

*Potter, H —*

*I hope you enjoy the enclosed "get-well gift." Do not start reading through it until after you've been released from the Infirmary. Madam Pomfrey has forbidden myself and the other teacher from giving you anything that counted as "homework." Which I suppose this technically is since your proffered reason for requesting it was as research materials for your paper on the Death Eater trials. When you have been released from the tyranny of the Hogwarts Infirmary and have had a chance to thoroughly review the transcript (Take your time – at least a few weeks of careful study), come and see me about it. After a quick perusal, I have already noted some salient features and look forward to hearing your thoughts on them.*

— Scrimgeour

Harry grinned. Finally, he had the mysterious Sirius Black trial transcripts! Harry hid the transcript underneath his pillow before opening the Prophet to read the paper's typically histrionic coverage of the Hogsmeade attack. Soon after, he nearly choked on his pumpkin juice when he learned that according to witnesses on the scene, the raid had been led by Sirius Black himself.

At around eleven o'clock, the doors to the Infirmary quietly opened and closed on their own accord. Seconds later, Jim Potter pulled off his invisibility cloak and sat down on the bed opposite his older sibling.

"Is Pomfrey gone for the night?" he whispered.

"*Madam* Pomfrey, and yes. So now that my brother is here and can see that I'm not the invalid all the grown-ups think I am, maybe you can tell me everything that happened Saturday and since?"

Jim laughed and gave a quick overview of the things that didn't make the papers. Harry was saddened to learn of the death of Iris and the loss of the Tonks Clinic, but he was relieved to know that Ted Tonks had already been released from St. Mungo's. He also reassured Jim that being apparated away from danger against his will did not reflect at all on his courage. In fact (and despite his own personal disdain for the man), Harry commended Peter Pettigrew for removing Jim from the scene.

"Jim, you're the Boy-Who-Lived. The One with the Power to vanquish Moldy Shorts for good. You must realize that you're a prime target in any Death Eater attack. You may want to '*fight the bad guys*' but you're the only one who can finish the job against the *real* bad guy. As much as it might frustrate you, if you get yourself killed before the final battle, it may be that no one else can step up in your place."

"I know, I know," he grumbled. "But ... I'm a Gryffindor. I can't just sit around and do nothing when I've got the chance to help people." Then, he paused as he realized what he'd said. "Not that Slytherins won't help people, of course. I've learned my lesson about judging your house."

"So no more complaints about slimy snakes?" Harry asked mischievously.

"Nope... Well, maybe on the Quidditch pitch."

"Well, that goes without saying." The brothers both laughed at that, but then Jim grew thoughtful.

"Have you ever thought ... have you ever thought that it could have been you?" he asked pensively.

"What do you mean? I thought you got over that boggart fear."

Jim shrugged. "I wouldn't say I got over it so much as it got outclassed by Dementors as something to be scared of. Still ... we were both born as the seventh month died and less than ten minutes apart. Dad said the healer '*cut the cord*' right as the clock struck twelve. So, if I'd been born even a minute later, you would have been the one to fit the Prophecy instead of me."

"Well, thank you, Little Brother, for taking that burden off my shoulders. I am entirely too selfish and cynical to be anybody's Chosen One." He paused for a moment then, as a fleeting memory brought to his mind during his fall four days earlier popped into his head again. "Mind you, it is ... curious that you and I both have brother wands to Tom Riddle's. I've often wondered if there was some mystical significance of that. Something twin-related, maybe."

"Curious," Jim repeated slowly as he tried to dredge up a memory of his own. Not for the first time, he wished he'd had the right stuff to master Occlumency as Harry had. An eidetic memory would make his life easier in lots of ways. "Mr. Ollivander said something about that when I got my wand. '*Very curious indeed, Mr. Potter,*' in that creepy voice of his. He didn't use the phrase *brother wand*, but he did say it was definitely curious that Fawkes had only given up three feathers for wand-making in the last century, and that one of them went into the wand that gave me my scar. Did he say anything like that to you?"

Harry thought for a moment and then blushed. "He got as far saying '*Curious, very curious indeed*' before I cut him off and changed the topic." He coughed with some embarrassment. "That, um, was the day I met James and found out ... everything. I was feeling a bit ... cranky."

Jim smirked. "Cranky? Is that what we're calling it?"

"Never you mind," Harry said easily. "What else did Ollivander say?"

Jim thought for a moment. "Um, let's see. '*We can expect great things from you, Mr. Potter, because the one who gave you that scar did great things. Terrible things, but great.*' Or something like that. Scared the crap out of me at the time, to be honest." Then, he noticed the look Harry was giving him. "What?"

"Ollivander knew that Voldemort had a brother wand to you and by extension to me?" Harry asked with a thoughtful expression.

"Well, yeah," Jim replied. "I mean, apparently he always brags about remembering every wand he ever sold. Is it that surprising that he'd remember the wand he sold Voldemort?"

"Yes, actually!" Harry said as he sat up in bed. "Because Ollivander didn't sell a wand to Voldemort. Ollivander sold a wand to an 11-year-old Tom Riddle, but it was Voldemort who used it against you."

Jim looked confused for a second before his face lit up in understanding. "But how could he have known that Tom Riddle became Lord Voldemort when that knowledge was under a Fidelius?!"

Harry and Jim simply looked at one another, for neither had any answers that didn't just raise more questions. And disturbing questions at that.

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***The next morning ...***



Harry woke up early feeling remarkably refreshed and mostly recovered. After a quick examination, Madam Pomfrey announced that she had a few lingering concerns but would most likely release him after lunch. He was excused from his afternoon classes, though, and she firmly told him to return to the Infirmary immediately if he suffered from any dizziness, headaches, or really any symptoms at all.

At ten o'clock, Artie Podmore entered the Infirmary. Harry's initial excitement changed to concern when the solicitor said he was there to discuss correspondence he'd received from the Firebolt Broom Company. With everything that had happened, Harry had almost forgotten that he'd basically stolen an incredibly expensive prototype broom and then taken it on a high-speed chase in the wrong gear before crashing it. He wondered how much he'd have to pay for it, or worse, whether he'd be prosecuted for stealing it. Fortunately, Artie quickly put his mind at ease.

"No, Harry, they won't be prosecuting you or even seeking compensation for the damaged broom. They've already reclaimed it and refurbished it. And raised the sale price even higher, I might add. Apparently, your little escapade has made it even more of a collector's item."

"So what did they contact you about?" Harry asked in confusion. Artie smiled.

"Well, Harry, it seems that tales of your broom-flying exploits have been spread far and wide by the press. Particularly tales of how you rode a Firebolt in the wrong gear and still managed to completely outfly three werewolves on Nimbus 2001's. The Firebolt Company thinks this is a story worth spreading even further given how well it reflects on the quality of their product. And so,

they contacted me to make you a somewhat unusual offer. Tell me, have you ever heard of a Muggle business concept referred to as an '*endorsement deal*'?"

And that was how Harry Potter got a free Firebolt from the company's new Chaser Elite line.

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Harry's last visitation before his release wasn't quite as enjoyable or profitable, however. Just before lunch, Mad-Eye Moody arrived and pulled up a chair. His grim expression immediately told Harry that unlike his solicitor, the ex-auror wasn't there to deliver good news.

"How are you feeling, Potter?" he began.

Harry shrugged. "All things considered, pretty good, Mr. Moody. I was wondering if you might come by at some point."

Moody didn't respond for a moment. "I saw you fall," he finally said. "With my eye, I probably had a better view of what happened than anyone who wasn't one of your pursuers. Everyone assumes that you got hit by a curse of some kind but recovered enough to summon your broom and escape. But I *saw*, Potter. None of the werewolves ever hit you except indirectly with a Concussion Hex that knocked you off your broom ... and caused you to lose your wand. Which you promptly summoned back to your hand. So, I'd like to know, Potter. Was that accidental magic? Or something else? Because I know that if you couldn't summon your wand Saturday morning, there's no way you could summon it that afternoon without doing something ... unusual. So what's the story?"

Harry shrugged. "Not much to it, really. You were the one who suggested I use a parallel thought-track to focus on

learning a wandless spell. I just ... expanded on the idea." He honestly tried not to sound smug, but failed in the effort.

"Expanded," Moody replied with a snort. "Can I go out on a limb and guess that you used more than one thought-track?"

"Um several more, actually," the boy said somewhat evasively.

"Uh-huh. So tell me, Potter, do you happen to recall me mentioning that there were some pitfalls to that technique?"

He sighed. "Yes, sir, though we never got to discuss what they were. But honestly, Mr. Moody, are any of those pitfalls worse than dying from a 2000-foot drop?"

"At ease, Potter. I'm not saying you did anything wrong. You had a million-to-one chance and you took it and it paid off. When your back's against the wall, you do whatever it takes to win. I just ... regret the sacrifice you had to make to win this particular battle."

"Sacrifice, sir?" Harry said uneasily.

Moody nodded. "As I taught you, learning wandless magic requires connecting your sense-memory of performing the spell in question to your core through the use of psychic strands. I also told you that you have a finite number of those strands. The technique of using parallel minds to accelerate wandless magical potential lets you devote more of your mind to mastering the spell and thus devoting more strands to it that you would normally use in order to learn it more quickly. However, this naturally means you will have fewer strands to devote to other spells in the future. Whatever you did, Potter, allowed you to cram literally

years of practice into a few seconds in order to completely master that spell. But in the process..."

He paused as if delaying the news would make it easier to bear. "I asked Poppy to run a diagnostic assessment of your core. It appears that you somehow managed to dedicate all of your available psychic strands to that one spell. You will likely be *amazingly good* at that spell, but only that one. You don't have any psychic strands left to apply to any other wandless magic."

The Infirmary was silent save for the ticking of the clock on the wall and the whirring of Moody's eye as Harry absorbed the news. "So ... do you mean to say ... that the only wandless spell I'll ever be able to use is *Accio*?"

"No, Potter," Moody answered in a leaden voice. "I mean to say that the only wandless spell you'll ever be able to use is *Accio Wand*."

Harry stared at his mentor for what seemed like an eternity. Then, in a swift motion, his hand shot up off his lap. In response, Moody's own wand darted out of its holster almost faster than the eye could follow, whirled around in mid-air, and snapped into Harry's hand. It shot off a few yellow sparks that seemed to hint at indignant surprise.

"I guess I'll just have to work with what I've got then," Harry said nonchalantly. "And on the bright side, at least now I'll get to see all those memories of Voldemort in combat."

Moody's magical eye spun around madly while his regular eye simply widened in surprise. And then, he simply threw his head back and laughed.

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***DMLE Headquarters***  
***6 November 1993***  
***2:00 a.m.***

Janos Skorzeny slept fitfully in his DMLE holding cell. His captors had spent the last four days constantly interrogating him for information about his pack, but they'd gotten nothing from him despite Veritaserum, Legilimency, and (when Potter and Bones weren't around) flat-out torture on the secret orders of Minister Fudge. His loyalty to his pack was absolute, and besides, the full moon was drawing ever nearer, and the Beast's ability to resist coercion grew ever stronger. He did not know if Fenrir would attempt a rescue or if he would be sent to Azkaban, but either way, the filthy wizards would get nothing from him.

Then, in an instant, he awoke and shot up in his cot at the sound of the cell door opening. He readied himself for another round with the Aurors, but to his surprise, it was a rather beautiful young woman in fashionable robes instead of a uniform. Even more surprisingly, no one else accompanied her.

"Good evening, werewolf," she said brightly.

Janos laughed. "Have the aurors given up already? Maybe they've decided to win me over by sending me a whore to play with!" With that, he lunged up off of his cot. But before he could take a step, a wand suddenly appeared in the woman's hand, and without a word spoken, Janos was lifted up and slammed against the far wall. With another flick of her wand, he was forced to his knees and then placed in a painful Body-Bind.

"I do apologize for being so brusque, werewolf, but I am quite pressed for time. I need to know what you know. About your employers and their plans. And also about the Azkaban break-out, if you and your kind were involved in it."

"You'll get nothing from me, witch. I am Janos Skorzeny of the line of Fenrir Greyback! I fear no torture."

"I have no interest in the pedigree of a werewolf, Mr. Skorzeny. Nor am I here to torture you or legitimize you or dose you with potions. I am well aware of your resistance to those things." She walked towards him while twirling her wand between her fingers. As she came closer, her eyes lit up and she grinned at the thought of what she was about to do.

"I am Cassilda Selwyn of the House of Selwyn, werewolf. And I have my own means of getting into your head."

She placed the tip of her wand against his right temple and then slowly drew it across the werewolf's forehead. Janos felt no pain, only a faint numbness where the wand touched him. Consequently, he did not even know to be alarmed until the blood started dripping down his face.

"Quite literally, in fact," Cassilda said with a gentle laugh.

It was not until dawn the next day when an auror checked in on the werewolf and immediately threw up on the floor before collecting himself and sounding the alarm. The body of Janos Skorzeny lay on the floor in a large pool of blood. His scalp was laying on the cot nearby along with the skullcap to which it was still attached.

The werewolf's brain was conspicuous by its absence.

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## ***The Hogwarts Infirmary***

***7 November 1993***

***3 p.m. (After the Gryffindor-Hufflepuff Quidditch match)***

Jim Potter lay in his infirmary bed and stared at the ceiling without blinking as his thoughts churned in his head. The day had started off poorly when he received the news from Lily that something had happened at DMLE headquarters and that James would not be able to attend the Quidditch match. It was the first time his father hadn't been there to see him play since he made the team as a firstie. Lily wouldn't say what was going on, but the story was soon splayed out across the Daily Prophet – somehow, one of the werewolves captured the previous Saturday had been brutally murdered inside his cell by persons unknown. Since James had been the one to delay the werewolf's transfer to Azkaban, the creature's murder represented a PR disaster on top of the terrible nature of the security breach itself and the lost intelligence the werewolf might have provided.

To be honest, Jim had wished that he could skip the match as well. The weather had suddenly turned awful, and the teams were forced to play in a heavy rainstorm. It would have been impossible for Jim to ever spot the snitch had Harry not caught him on the way to the match and cast the Impervius Charm on his glasses to make them waterproof.

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### ***Earlier ...***

"If you really wanna be helpful, Harry," Jim said, "you can let me borrow your fancy new Firebolt."

Harry's Chaser Elite broom had been the talk of the school when it had been delivered the day before, and just the sight of it made nearly every Quidditch enthusiast in the school drool with envy.

"Not a chance, Little Brother," Harry answered with a laugh. "You can beat Cedric Diggory without it. You facing him on a Firebolt as well would just be cruel."

"I bet you're glad now it's not Slytherin playing us today in all this." Both boys were headed to the pitch under the cover of Umbrella Charms, but it would be impossible for the players to maintain them while in the air.

Harry looked wistful. "Actually, I kinda wish Slytherin was still playing today."

"In Merlin's name, why?" Jim exclaimed.

"Well first of all," Harry said. "getting our match rescheduled because I was in hospital feels like a sign of weakness, and I can't stand that any more than you can."

Jim considered that. "Fair enough. And second reason?"

Harry looked around to make sure no one could hear. "Ginny's talented but not as experienced as you. Our best chance to win would be an environment in which neither Seeker could find the Snitch until after we'd built up a 150-point lead."

Jim gave him a sour look. "You're awfully confident to think you could get a lead that big against our Chasers."

"There's nothing wrong with confidence borne of talent, Jim," Harry said almost haughtily.



Jim laughed. "Whatever." Then, he glanced down towards the pitch where Diggory was already giving his team a pep-talk. "It's Hufflepuff. I'm not expecting any problems."

At that, Harry looked at Jim sharply and made a disgruntled face.

"What?" Jim asked.

"Nothing," he said. "Just ... beware the gods of irony."

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### ***Later ...***

Jim hadn't known anything about the gods of irony, who Blaise Zabini had taught most of Slytherin to hate and fear, but he soon received an object lesson in not attracting their wrath. At first, the game seemed under control despite the weather conditions, as Gryffindor quickly built up a small lead. Then, Jim had just spotted the Snitch when the disaster occurred. Somehow, for some mad reason, the Dementors stationed over the Forbidden Forest abandoned their post and swarmed onto the Quidditch pitch!

Immediately, a half-dozen corporeal Patronuses sprang into existence to ward the creatures away, along with a score of lesser mist Patronuses. On the ground below, Jim could see Neville's bear, Remus's wolf, and his mother's doe all darting around the Dementors to stall their advance.

But then, he heard a terrifying yet familiar scream and turned just in time to see a Dementor – no, *that* Dementor – rise up behind him and grab him by the arm. Instantly, Jim went completely cold as he felt the life draining from him even before the Dementor could lean in for the Kiss. At the last second, the Dementor screamed in pain as a flying silver boar rammed into it. But it was too late for Jim who lost consciousness and fell from his broom. In the distance,

he could barely make out the booming voice of Albus Dumbledore cry out "**ARRESTO MOMENTUM!**" before everything went black.

When he came to, everything was over. Hufflepuff had won the match when Diggory caught the Snitch while Jim was fighting for his life against a soul-sucking monster. Of course, the ever-noble Diggory had offered to replay the match, but the equally-noble Oliver Wood declined. No one asked Jim what he thought about having a chance to go up against Diggory again without having to dodge Dementors. Soon after, Madam Pomfrey shooed everyone out of the Infirmary, though Harry, as Jim's brother, was allowed to remain. This also was something no one asked Jim's feelings about.

"What happened to my broom?" Jim finally asked.

"What?" Harry said. "Oh, yeah. I gave it to Neville, so it's probably back in your dorm room by now."

"*You* gave it to him?" Jim's voice was oddly suspicious. "Why did *you* have it?"

"Because, Little Brother," Harry answered cheerfully, "I was the one who saved it from destruction. After you fell off, it went out of control and was headed straight for the Whomping Willow when I tagged it with a Summoning Charm. I know how much that broom means to you."

"I'm sure you do," Jim replied. "And I guess the idea that if it got destroyed, Dad might replace it with a Firebolt never entered your head?"

Harry crooked at eyebrow at the insinuation. "Believe it or not, Jim, but no, that idea never entered my head." Then, he paused and smiled at Jim. "Though the fact that you thought

of it demonstrates a wonderful potential for Slytherin thinking that you really ought to cultivate."

Jim stared at his older brother intently but said nothing. Finally, Harry's smile faded away to be replaced with a look of concern.

"Jim, what is it?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

Jim didn't answer at first, but eventually, he looked away from Harry and up towards the ceiling. Then, he rubbed his hands over his face. "It's ... it's nothing, Harry. I'm sorry. I'm just... I'm tired. Really, really tired."

"... okay. I'll just head on then. Get some rest, and we'll talk again when you're out of here."

Jim didn't answer. He just rolled over in bed with his back to Harry who watched silently for a moment and then turned to leave. He paused at the door to turn back towards Jim once last time before departing.

Alone at last, Jim shut his eyes and tried to rest, but sleep proved impossible. Despite his best efforts, he could not stop thinking about the voice – no, *voices!* – that he'd heard when the Dementor grabbed him. Voices that he could now clearly recognize, but whose words both confused him and filled him with a terrible, inexplicable dread.

***"Please! I beg you! Have mercy! Take me! Kill me instead!"***

***"Stand aside you silly girl! Stand aside now!"***

***"No! Take me! Not Harry! NOT HARRY!"***

## Chapter End Notes

Dun-dun-DUUUN!

With that shocking development, I must regretfully announce that the next chapter will not appear before October 1, 2018 at the earliest. The next story arc has a complicated time line, so I want to write out the whole thing completely before I post any of it. Also, my novel is nearly complete, but I have put off finishing the last few chapters for too long. Sorry for the delay.

In the meantime, readers who wish to discuss this chapter or any other POS-related matters are invited to The Sinister Man's [Discord Server](#).

# Random Moments of Weirdness

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### ***HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATH EATER MENACE***

*Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.*

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## ***CHAPTER 23: Random Moments of Weirdness***

### ***14 November 1993 Hogwarts***

In the aftermath of the previous week's disastrous Quidditch match, the Daily Prophet had been inundated with complaints about the presence of Dementors at Hogwarts, but Minister Fudge was resolute. He was also backed in his decision by James Potter, Amelia Bones and, with obvious reluctance, Albus Dumbledore. The Prophet also printed several letters in support of the Ministry claiming that despite the risk, the Dementors were needed in light of the werewolf attack two weeks earlier. The Hogwarts Headmaster did persuade Fudge to assign more Ministry personnel proficient with the Patronus Charm to the school to monitor the army of Dementors still stationed over the Forbidden Forest. He also announced that while the Dementors were at Hogwarts, Hogsmeade Weekends were limited to students who were able to summon a

Patronus, an announcement that led to much booing from the student body.

In response to the denial of Hogsmeade privileges as much as fear of the Dementors, nearly the entire student body abruptly signed up for Patronus lessons, though it was painfully clear that most of them lacked the willpower (or simply raw power) to master the difficult Charm. Poor Marcus Flint found himself overwhelmed by the sheer number of students attending his classes. Luckily – and to the surprise of nearly everyone – the new caretaker Malachi Sturgeon was apparently a wizard who was himself proficient with the Charm, and Sturgeon agreed to help Flint with his class load. Naturally, this led to an increase in wild rumors about how a skilled wizard ended up working as a caretaker, a job traditionally held by a squib. The consensus view of the Hogwarts rumor mill was that Sturgeon was actually an undercover Auror or possibly even an Unspeakable. This, in turn, led to an increasing number of young girls developing crushes on the brooding, mysterious man much to his own embarrassment.

On the second Sunday afternoon after the match, the Third through Fifth years who were studying the Patronus found themselves in the Great Hall. Somewhat surprisingly, the Third Years as a class were outshining their elders. Harry, Hermione, Theo, and several others in their year had demonstrated at least the beginnings of a mist Patronus, though so far, only Neville had succeeded in producing a corporeal version. Their numbers grew by one more when Anthony Goldstein's wand lit up with a brilliant ethereal light that lasted for several seconds.

“Well done, Anthony!” Hermione exclaimed. Anthony beamed in response.

“Thank you, Hermione. Oh! And also, thank you for putting me onto that book. I finally found it in the Restricted Section. Well, Madam Pince found it after I told her what I was looking for, and then Professor Flitwick gave me permission to check it out.”

“Which book?” she said in some confusion. Harry crooked an eyebrow.

“The one about magic not working well with either plastics or electricity,” Anthony answered. “**Magic and Muggles: The Source of Their Inferiority** by Englebert von Smallhausen. It's hideously bigoted but also describes several legitimate experimental studies to determine why magic caused Muggle technology to break down, and they all agreed that magic causes plastics to degrade quickly while also causing fluctuations in electrical resistance. Quite fascinating ... again except for the hideous bigotry.”

Harry snorted in surprise. “And that’s the book you couldn’t remember the name of, Hermione?” he inquired. “I’d have thought that a name like Englebert von Smallhausen alone would be unforgettable without even addressing the title.”

Hermione made a face. “Yes, yes. I had forgotten what book it was. I’m so sorry that I don’t have your faultless memory, Harry.”

Nearby (but not near enough to be a part of that group), Theo No-Name watched as his friends bantered. He’d deliberately taken up a spot by himself so that none of the people he cared about would be contaminated by the power of the Ultimate Sanction. But where that thought had been depressing a week before, now it was merely annoying. Despite the power of the Sanction, Theo knew who his friends were, even if those friends no longer knew it

themselves. He looked to the far side of the room where he could see Neville Longbottom giving some Patronus advice to other Purebloods. Briefly, Longbottom made eye contact with him and sneered (quite impressively for a Gryffindor) before turning away towards Cassius Warrington. Theo shook his head – as if those two would have even been on speaking terms a year before!

Theo closed his eyes and let the tension drain away. Cruel magic may have turned Neville against him, but after his conversation with Hermione in the Astronomy Tower, he had faith and hope again. One day, he would beat the Ultimate Sanction. One day, all his friends would be his friends once more. He drew forth a memory from years before, one he'd not tried previously as a "happy memory," but which suddenly seemed more appropriate than anything else he'd used.

*"Neville and Hermione are my friends, and they're in trouble. So I'm there for them. Just like I'm there for you."*

He took a deep breath, opened his eyes, and with one last glance around at Harry, Hermione, and Neville, Theo cast the spell. "**EXPECTO PATRONUM.**" A silvery mist poured from his wand, stronger and brighter than ever before, but Theo didn't stop. He pushed more and more of himself into the spell as he focused harder and harder on that strange feeling in the pit of his stomach that he'd first experienced on the way to face Quirrell and rescue Neville and Hermione. The feeling of knowing that he finally had someone other than his brother who he cared about enough to risk dying for.

The mist grew and grew until finally, it collapsed in on itself. And there floating in the air in front of Theo No-Name, was



a glowing silvery ... *rabbit*. Theo laughed in delight at the sight of it.

The summoning of a corporeal Patronus -- and especially by a boy who half the students present assumed to be evil in some way -- immediately caused everyone else to stop what they were doing and stare in amazement. Hermione and several other students who were unaffected by the Sanction immediately moved around the boy to show him their support and admiration. On the other side of the room, Neville Longbottom fumed openly as if offended that someone like the Outcast could now become the second youngest person to ever summon a corporeal Patronus. Then, he jumped back in surprise when the flying rabbit darted over towards him almost faster than the eye could follow. It paused in front of his face and twitched its nose almost quizzically before jetting back over to Theo's side with the same blinding speed.

While several students not under the Sanction's effects crowded around Theo, Harry (as expected) held back, though his expression and body language made it clear to Theo's Slytherin eyes how proud he was of his friend.

"It's beautiful," Hermione said softly. "What are you going to call it?"

Theo thought for a moment. "Fiver," he said, giving the name of one of the rabbits from **Watership Down**.

The Muggleborn looked at him with some surprise. "Fiver? Not Hazel?"

Theo smiled and nodded his head in Harry's direction. "Hazel's the hero of the story. That's not me. Fiver's the hero's little brother who travels alongside him and has all the good ideas."

Nearby, Jim Potter watched the display with a smile, as he'd become rather fond of Theo during their martial arts lessons. But then, his attention was drawn to his brother, and his smile faded. He shook his head and tried to focus on his own happy memories such as they were. Then, he cast the spell.

***"EXPECTO PATRONUM."***

There was nothing. Not even a wisp of silver.

***15 November 1993***

***8:00 p.m.***

***The Potions classroom***

True to his word, Professor Snape dragooned Harry into lessons with the obscure and almost certainly illegal Sectumsempra Curse. As with Hermione (who had joined him this day), Snape first required Harry to learn the Vulnera Sanentur Charm which was the only healing spell capable of healing the bloody damage caused by Snape's custom-designed werewolf-killing curse.

When he could do so with discretion, Harry studied his Head of House with a mixture of surprise and concern, though concealed as best he could through his Occlumency. Intuitively, he realized that Snape was for some reason working extra-hard to control and hide his own emotions as he taught the spell, and yet for some reason, his normally rigid self-control was quite lax today.

*"I wonder what happened that led him to create this spell," Harry thought to himself. "Whatever it is though, I think he really must hate werewolves as a result. I wonder if he and Reg might end up bonding over the subject."*

By the end of the first session, Harry had already mastered the deadly curse, having successfully damaged the training dummies summoned by Snape with cuts that would be fatal to a living person struck with them. Satisfied, Snape reminded the two to *never* use the curse except in a true life-or-death situation and then instructed them to clean up the room and return to their dorms before departing himself.

As the two Third Years were straightening up the classroom, Harry decided to ask the question that had been on his mind for some time. He cast a privacy charm on the door, which caused Hermione to look at him in surprise.

"Sorry," Harry said. "But I've been dying to ask you and this is the first chance we've had to talk in private. Just between you and me ... what is the deal with that book you and Anthony have been talking about?"

Hermione stiffened slightly. "What makes you think there's any ... *deal* to discuss, Harry?"

"Hermione, people say you're the smartest witch of our age, and I don't dispute that. But book-smarts don't make you a good liar, and – no offense – you're actually a terrible liar." He paused to reconsider his words. "No, that's not fair. By non-Slytherin standards, you're actually not a bad liar at all. But, well, I am a Slytherin who's *really good* at reading people, and I *can* tell when you're lying. You didn't mean to tell Anthony that plastics and electricity disrupted magic, and you didn't want to reveal where you'd learned that little fact. I don't know if you got it from the book Anthony found or from somewhere else. And I don't know why you want to be so evasive about it. But I do want you to know that, whatever secret you're hiding and for whatever reason, you can trust me with it. You know that, right?"

She studied him for several seconds as if to evaluate her choices before she finally sighed in resignation. "Harry, do you trust *me*? I mean *really* trust me?"

Harry started to offer a glib response, but he was suddenly struck by the seriousness and intensity with which Hermione asked the question. He also noticed for the first time how tired the girl was, and for some reason, he no longer thought it was due simply to her heavy course load. And so he took a moment to truly think about the question she'd asked before giving an answer of his own.

"I trust you more than anyone else in the world," he finally said.

She exhaled softly, and Harry was surprised by how relieved she seemed to be at his response.

"Then I'm going to ask you to trust me when I say I can't answer any of your questions. Not right now, anyway. Or possibly ever. I mean, if I could tell anyone it would be you. And quite honestly, I *wish* I could tell you everything because I think your advice would be *really* helpful right now. But ... I can't. I can only ask you to ... to let me handle the things I need to handle on my own and without any interference."

His eyes narrowed as he considered the girl's cryptic and evasive answer. "Hermione, are you under a secrecy oath of some kind?"

She opened her mouth as if to respond but then snapped it shut almost immediately, which Harry thought was an answer in and of itself.

"Can you tell me if you're in trouble of some kind? Or if there's anything I can do to help?"

She bit her lip softly before answering. "I ... wouldn't say I'm in trouble. I just have some things I need to do ... alone. And when they're all done, I'll tell you everything. Well, if I can anyway. As for how you can help, all I can ask is that you trust me to be able to do what I need to do. And," she swallowed tightly, "and trust me to do it on my own. Please, Harry. For the time being at least, don't worry about me. And if you see me ... I don't know, acting *weird* at any time, just put it out of your head. Can you do that for me, Harry?"

The boy stared at her for what seemed like an eternity but was really only six seconds.

"Alright. I do trust you, and I have a lot of faith in your intelligence and sensibility. If at any point I get the impression that you're in *danger*, I'm probably going to stick my nose back in. But up until that point ... I promise to ignore any *weirdness*. Will that do?"

She smiled in relief. "Yes, Harry, and thank you."

He looked around the room. "I'll tell you what though. You may not be in any danger, but you've obviously been overworking yourself. I'll finish up here. You can go on to bed."

Hermione started to protest, but Harry would not be denied and anyway the room was nearly done. So the girl stepped forward and gave him a quick hug, much to his own surprise, before leaving the room. Harry spent a few quick minutes finishing the clean-up as he contemplated the exceedingly strange conversation he'd just had. He was about to put the last of the target dummies away when he had a sudden thought. He took a quick paranoid look around the room and then cast a Silencing Charm on the door. Then, he moved back to the other side of the room

and pointed his wand at the last dummy before taking a deep slow breath.

***“SSSECTUMSSSEMPRA!”*** he hissed and to his surprise, there was actually a slight recoil from his wand – something he’d never experienced before – as several waves of intense magical force poured out of it to completely rip the training dummy apart.

And also place several cracks in the blackboard that had been hanging behind it.

Harry stared in amazement at the damage his first serious attempt at Parselmagic had inflicted before he could finally summon the will to speak.

*“Bloody hell,”* he whispered.

It took another half-hour to repair the damage he’d done to Snape’s classroom. When he was done, he took one last look around before exiting.

“What a day,” he said with a rueful shake of his head.

***21 November 1993***

***The Law Office of Peter Pettigrew, Esq.***

*Peter –*

*As you know, we’ve been through a lot with Jim and Harry over the last year or so, and especially over the last few weeks. The attack on Hogsmeade that left Harry on his own against a pack of werewolves even as we were all focused on getting Jim to safety (and thank you for that, Pete, and for everything else you’ve done for your godson) has forced me to confront the full scope of how badly I’ve let the elder of my sons down. I abandoned him for ten years and*

*schemed against him for another two before I nearly lost him for good. No more.*

*I appreciate all you've done with regard to Harry since, after all, it's what I asked of you. You've always been a good friend, but right now, I don't need a friend to enable my worst instincts. I need a friend to tell me when I'm being a horse's arse. Please make that a priority in all our future dealings. In case I haven't been clear, I want you to desist in all efforts to remove Harry from the Potter family. Furthermore, please check into the status of the replacement Heir's Ring. If Harry is amenable and it can be finished in time, I'd like to formally present him with his Ring on his 14th birthday and have him acknowledged as Heir Apparent at that time. I guess Jim will have to settle for just being the second son of a filthy rich family and also the idol of millions.*

*I know it's a big switch from our prior conversations, but if you have any thoughts on how I can make it up to Harry for how I've treated him, I'm all ears. Also, I hope you can find the time to get to know Harry yourself and develop a bond with him. You've been a wonderful godfather for Jim, but since Harry's own godfather is a filthy traitor who will hopefully never get within a hundred miles of him, I would be very grateful if you could assume a godfatherly role for Harry if only informally.*

*You should come over for dinner sometime. It's a bit lonely at Potter Manor by myself. Let me know when you're free.*

*- James*

Peter read the letter from his best friend and best client three times, with his face growing increasingly dour with each read-through. Over by the window, James's owl Godric

was perched on the sill waiting for a reply or at least a treat. Finally, it hooted loudly as if to get Peter's attention. In that, the bird succeeded as the solicitor wadded up the letter and threw it forcefully at the owl's head. Godric hooted again, more indignantly this time, as he narrowly dodged the projectile before flapping out of the window.

"Well," Peter said to no one, "this day is off to a fairly wretched start. I wonder what disaster will strike next."

As if in karmic response, there was a soft knock at his door before his receptionist Yvette entered.

"My apologies, Mr. Pettigrew, but someone is here to see you."

Peter grunted. "Well, I don't have anyone scheduled, and I'm not in the mood for a walk-in client. Tell them to make an appointment for next week."

Before Yvette could respond, the visitor swept past her into the office. Peter immediately jumped to his feet as he recognized the young woman standing before him.

"Do forgive my directness, Mr. Pettigrew," said Cassilda Selwyn as she smoothly slipped out of her traveling cloak and handed it to the surprised Yvette. "But I find that I am not inclined to wait a week before speaking with you. Nor am I inclined to be treated like common rabble come to retain your services for some tedious domestic dispute."

Peter grimaced while straightening his tie. "Do forgive me, Lady Selwyn. I was ... unprepared for a surprise visit from a personage as august as yourself. What can I do for you?"

She smiled in a way that a less astute person would find courteous. Peter, however, was quite astute and also quite



knowledgeable about the House Selwyn's true role in the last war. And consequently, he found the woman's smile to be distinctly troubling.

"Well, Mr. Pettigrew, as it happens, I've been having the most engaging conversations with a mutual friend we share. And based on his ... revelations, I do believe that there's a great deal we can do for each other."

Her smile grew and become even more charming and yet somehow more predatory. Peter licked his lips unconsciously. "*Oh yes,*" he thought to himself as he invited his visitor to take a seat. "*This day just keeps getting better and better.*"

***28 November 1993***  
***12 Grimmauld Place***

By the end of November, Sirius Black had recuperated enough to move around with Dobby's assistance. On this particular day, he was in the main downstairs parlor warming himself next to the fireplace. In addition to warmth, the change of scenery had the added benefit of getting him farther away from Kreacher's rantings. The mad elf had taken to hiding in the attic where he would prostrate himself for hours before the picture of Walburga Black that was still shouting insanely from her perch on the isolated patch of wall that Dobby had liberated from the main foyer.

Sirius had just opened the Prophet while indulging in some delicious watercress sandwiches made by Dobby when the orange flames in the fireplace suddenly turned a brilliant green and an obese man in coveralls and a cap stepped through with a heavy toolbox in one hand. Sirius jumped out of his chair and fumbled for his wand, but before he

could cast his spell, his legs gave way, and he fell unceremoniously to the floor.

The big man looked down at him and shook his head.

“Honestly, Sirius, get a hold of yourself. It’s only me.”

While still on the floor, Sirius was still able to point his wand (or rather his Uncle Alphard’s wand) at the intruder.

“Me who?” he demanded.

The big man scoffed before shaking his whole body violently. After a few seconds of blurring, the intruder was revealed as Regulus Black, now wearing coveralls at least three sizes too big.

“Me, your long-suffering brother who still needs to finish getting the Floo set up, so kindly don’t hex me while I’m working.” Reg clucked his tongue and set the toolbox on the floor before helping Sirius back to his chair.

“Floo ... set up? Since when do you know how to set up a Floo?” Sirius scoffed.

Regulus shrugged. “In Australia, Aurors are required to learn how to operate the Floo Network in order to facilitate raids and to stop suspects from escaping that way. Apparently, it’s different here in Britain, presumably because the bureaucratic thicket that runs the Floo Network Authority doesn’t want the DMLE or any other bureaucratic thickets intruding on their turf. The shape I was wearing just now was that of Angus McDougal, a fairly thick-headed 50-year-old wizard who barely passed his OWLS but got a job working with the Floo Network Authority through nepotism.”

“Uh-huh. And where was he while you were wearing his face?”

Regulus smirked. “I believe he was in Knockturn Alley cavorting with a prostitute provided to him by Lucius for certain favors completely unrelated to my own activities. Lucius and I have been setting this up for weeks. I’ve impersonated a total of seven different people in order to get approval for a Floo link-up here at Grimmauld Place while simultaneously concealing all records and evidence of its existence. Meanwhile, he’s bribed twice as many people to do seemingly innocuous favors that have no obvious connection to our ultimate aims. Of course, we’ll be somewhat limited in that we can only Floo to Longbottom Manor or Malfoy Manor at first, but it will make it a lot easier for Harry to come and visit here over the holidays.”

Sirius brightened at that, but then he became concerned. “And you’re sure no one will be able to track this back to us and use it to break into this place?”

“Positive,” Regulus sniffed. “Lucius and I are Slytherins, Sirius. This is the sort of thing we do every day before breakfast.”

Sirius rolled his eyes and went back to reading his paper while his brother opened up his toolbox and set to work.

### ***10 December 1993***

#### ***Hogwarts***

November passed into December largely without incident. The Daily Prophet remained as histrionic as ever, but then there were no further werewolf attacks, no further Dementor attacks, and no further sightings of Sirius Black or anyone who even looked like Sirius Black. The various clubs continued to meet weekly. The Hogwarts Cultural

Preservation Society held dignified tea parties while discussing the finer points of Pureblood culture and history along with increasingly bizarre conspiracy theories about what Theo No-Name must have done to be judged worthy of the Sanction ... and also how he was able to command so much support from the school's Muggleborns. "*Dark Magic*" was the emerging consensus. To Club President Diggory's disappointment, only a few Muggleborns came to see what the club was about, but almost none did so more than once. When Cedric talked with them later, their complaints were vague and evasive. It seemed that while none of the club members were ever overtly rude to them, most of the Muggleborn attendees said that the group made them feel uncomfortable for reasons they couldn't quite articulate. The one exception was Justin Finch-Fletchley, whose unique status put him on the boundary between Muggleborn and Pureblood in a way that applied to no one else. Justin had attended three meetings before dropping out citing his other responsibilities. But he and Diggory were both Hufflepuffs, and after some prodding, Justin finally admitted that he'd gotten tired of certain people sniffing disdainfully every time he asked a question about something Purebloods were expected to have learned by the age of five.

Meanwhile, SPAM's meetings were less dignified but better attended, particularly after Harry somehow got the house elves to provide Muggle treats like sodas, ice cream, and Oreo cookies. Also, to Anthony Goldstein's delight, an increasingly large part of each meeting was given over to brainstorming about how Muggle innovations could be reproduced magically. There were, of course, limitations on just how far a group of teenagers could go in such inquiries. At one point, Colin Creevey asked if it were possible to transfigure something into antimatter. The boy didn't actually know anything about antimatter beyond what he'd heard discussed on *Star Trek*, but the question completely

horrified Hermione, Anthony, and Sue Li (the only three who even understood the question). All of them agreed that none of them should consider experimenting with using magic in the context of particle physics until after graduation, if ever. Then, Jim got involved by revealing that his mother had several Muggle college degrees including one for Physics. Harry was surprised, and not just about his mother's academic activities – Jim had been avoiding him for weeks, and this was the most they'd talked, even if it was as part of a crowd. Jim further agreed to talk with Lily and see if she would be willing to meet with SPAM and discuss the intersection of magic and Muggle science.

It was after one such SPAM meeting when Harry approached Hermione about joining Blaise and himself in working on a runic array for their Ancient Runes class. To Harry's disappointment, Hermione had already agreed to work with Anthony Goldstein and Sue Li, who had decided on some sort of home defense enchantment.

"I'm sorry, Harry, but Anthony asked me first," she said with some regret, though not as much as Harry thought appropriate. He narrowed his eyes.

"To be honest, I'd assumed based on past performance that *you* would have already approached *me* about a project. You do tend to stay three or so months ahead of everyone else when it comes to schoolwork." Then, he narrowed his eyes. "Is this a *weird* thing?" he asked suspiciously.

Hermione scoffed. "Not everything in my life is the product of ... *personal weirdness*, Harry," she replied.

He nodded at that. "I notice you didn't actually say *no*, Hermione."

She made a face but said nothing more.

## ***17 December 1993***

### ***Hogwarts***

During the last week before Christmas Break, Professor Scrimgeour finally held his much-anticipated dueling tournament. Harry had been looking forward to it, but he was ultimately disappointed with his final placement, mainly because of handicaps placed on him by his various mentors. Snape had forbidden him to use dilation during the tournament because it might reveal how far he'd progressed as an Occlumens and that might cause future problems with the Ministry. Moody had forbidden him to wandlessly summon any opponent's wand or to use any illusion-based Charms because they were the sort of skills best kept as a secret weapon. Besides, there were logistical problems using wandless summoning in a duel since the Summoning Charm did not function as well when used against an item in active use. Harry could easily summon a wand from a holster or even someone's hand if held in a light grip, but the spell would not work as well to summon a wand actively being used for spellcasting. Indeed, that limitation on the Accio Charm was what led to the subsequent creation of the Expelliarmus which, in contrast, could only work on someone who was considered armed in some sense. And finally, while Regulus did not forbid him to use any specific jinxes or hexes, he did order him to underplay his skills in general. After all, the boy would be debuting on the European junior dueling circuit the following summer, and Regulus was of the opinion that being a virtual unknown would be a better starting point for his dueling career than being "the kid who easily beat the Boy-Who-Lived" which would have every would-be duelist in his age group gunning for him before the first round.

All those limitations severely cramped Harry's style, with the end result that he only made it to the Quarterfinals

before being eliminated by Justin Finch-Fletchley. The other boy was not a spectacular duelist when it came to spellwork, but after a year of practice, his skill with the Averno shield was phenomenal. The duel between Justin and Harry was one of the longest of the tournament, but Harry was simply unable to penetrate Justin's defense (or at least, unable to do so without taking advantage of skills his mentors thought were best held in reserve), and eventually, the Muggleborn simply tired him out.

The 3rd Year Dueling Finalists were Justin and Jim, and the two were evenly matched to start. While Justin could parry nearly any attack, Jim with his Wu Xi Do training could dodge nearly any attack even in the small confines of a dueling platform. In the end, however, Jim's superior range of spells acquired through several years of specialized training won out, and Justin took the silver medal to Jim's gold. Harry enthusiastically congratulated both his friend and his brother for their success without giving any hint that he'd spotted several weak spots in each of their techniques and that he was confident of beating each of them if the situation ever demanded that he not hold back.

Harry also noted how reluctant Jim was to shake his hand. Or to even make eye contact with him. And so, the young Slytherin decided that enough was enough, and with some assistance from Hermione and a reluctant Ron, Harry was able to corner Jim in a classroom while on his way to the reception to be held after the tournament.

"Right, Jim," he said. "We need to talk."

Jim looked at the faces of his brother and friends with some trepidation. "Um, about what?" he asked cautiously.

"I hate to say it, mate," Ron said apologetically, "but you've been acting odd for weeks, ever since the Dementor attack. Harry came to me and said you'd been acting especially cold towards him, and he asked me if I knew why. I didn't, but I agreed with him that you've basically been flinching every time Harry looked at you. And, well, after everything that happened to *me* last year, I try to pay attention when people suddenly aren't acting like themselves."

"You think I'm ... *possessed* or something?" Jim asked incredulously.

"No," Harry said. "But we do all think you've been acting strangely, particularly towards me. And when people I care about start acting weird, I take an interest." As he said those words, both Harry and Hermione resolutely did not make eye contact.

Jim looked down at the floor for a few moments as if to hide his obvious discomfort. Then, he looked up at Hermione. "And why are *you* here?

The question seemed to surprise the witch. "Moral support, I suppose? Both Harry and Ron asked me to be here. I guess they thought I might have something to offer."

"Like a Seer's prediction?" Jim asked harshly. At first, Hermione thought he was teasing her, but then she realized to her shock that he was being quite serious.

"Jim," she stammered, "I'm *not* a Seer. I'm just someone who can apply common sense to what she sees in front of her. Obviously, that looks like precognition to the more credulous witches and wizards, but what does this whole Seer nonsense have to do with whatever has you upset?"



Jim fumed for a moment, but then the fight seemed to go out of him. He sat down in one of the chairs.

“Do you remember that fight we had after our very first Potions lesson. The one when I was being ... ‘a *braying ass*’?”

Ron laughed. “Who could ever forget it?”

Jim wasn’t laughing. “And do you remember what you said in the Common Room? *Wouldn’t it be funny if it had been Harry who destroyed You-Know-Who and our parents sent him away and put me forward as the Boy-Who-Lived in order to draw attention away from him?*”

Harry fumed and rolled his eyes. “*Oh for God’s sake,*” he thought to himself. “*This again!*”

“Jim,” Hermione stammered. “I’m not a Seer, and what I said to you wasn’t some prophetic vision. It was me being intentionally mean and provocative to you because you’d made me very angry. And if it’s still something you’re upset about, let me take this chance to apologize to you.”

“Hang on. That was two years ago!” Ron exclaimed. “What’s brought this on now?” But it was Harry who answered.

“Last year, Jim's boggart fear consisted of people suggesting he wasn’t worthy of being the Boy-Who-Lived,” Harry said bluntly. “I’d hoped he’d gotten over that, but something happened to put him back in a petty funk over it.”

Jim’s face clouded over in anger, but then, it faded as quickly as it arose. He rubbed his hands over his face.

“Harry, when I get near Dementors, I remember ... that night. I remember Voldemort attacking us. I remember him laughing at Mum and telling her to move aside.” He took a deep breath. “And I remember her begging Voldemort to kill her ... instead of you.” The other three were shocked at the revelation. “*“Not Harry!”* That’s what she said. She didn’t even mention me being there.”

He turned to Hermione. “That’s why I was wondering about all the signs of you being a Seer. Isn’t it possible that you really are a Seer but don’t know it? And when you blurted that out during our First Year, you were revealing the truth about the Boy-Who-Lived?”

Harry stepped forward, now obviously annoyed. “Well, that’s possible, I suppose. But permit me to suggest a far more likely theory – YOU’RE AN IDIOT!”

At that, Jim jumped out of his chair as if ready to fight his brother, but Harry simply stepped forward and got in his face. “Jim, just tell me one thing! What. Do. Dementors. Do?”

Caught off guard, Jim blinked repeatedly. “Um, they guard Azkaban?”

Harry closed his eyes and rubbed his temples.

“I think Harry is referring to the Dementor’s powers,” said Hermione. “Such as their ability to force their victims to relieve bad memories.”

“Five points to Gryffindor,” Harry muttered sarcastically. “And what else?”

“Oh, oh!” added Ron excitedly, “they also drain you of your good memories.”

“And there’s another five points,” Harry added. “Pity I’m not a professor. Anyway, let’s recap: Last year, your boggart fear was people telling you that you weren’t worthy of being the Chosen One. This year, Dementors edged slightly ahead of childish insecurities, but those feelings were still there. So what happens when a Dementor grabs you and gets almost close enough for the Kiss? You suddenly have an implausible and suspiciously-timed auditory hallucination that seems to validate your earlier insecurities by making you think that your mother considers me more important than you, even though she was the one who ....”

He paused and shook his head. “Never mind what she did. I want to get past all that and you should too. My point is, there is nothing reliable about this recovered memory you claim to have since you only remember it while under a psychic attack. Plus, while I still have issues about Lily Potter’s parenting skills, I find it wildly improbable that she would ever act the way you claim she did towards only one of her children. If those events happened *at all* as you say, I think it more likely that Lily offered up her life in exchange for *both* her children, but the Dementor effects cause you to remember it wrong. And *finally*, if you still have any doubts that you’re the Chosen One, may I remind you that you *melted* Professor Quirrell when you were eleven and stabbed a Basilisk to death when you were twelve. It should be pretty obvious to anyone with a brain larger than a grape seed which of us is the great conquering hero and it’s not the Slimy Slytherin.”

Jim absorbed Harry’s monologue and then looked to his older twin almost bashfully. “I told you I wasn’t going to call any Slytherins slimy anymore. Least of all you.”

“Yes, well. Regardless of how personally slimy I may or may not be, I am a Slytherin, and there’s no way I’m going to let

you fob your Voldemort-slaying duties off on me just because some floaty abomination tried to Kiss you and gave you an angst-overdose. You're the Boy-Who-Lived. Suck it up and deal with it."

Jim's eyes widened. And then he burst into laughter. "Alright, alright. I'm ... sorry I've been a git about what happened. And ... thank you ... all three of you for getting my head back on straight for me."

"So, are we brothers again?" Harry asked as he extended his hand. Jim clasped it warmly

"Yeah, we're brothers."

Harry smiled. "Good. So in the spirit of brotherly affection ... can I borrow the Cloak tomorrow?"

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed at his brashness.

"Pfft! Way to ruin the mood, Harry!" Jim said with a smile.

Harry shrugged unrepentantly. "I'm a Slytherin, Jim. If you're going to have me as your brother, dealing with my crass cynicism and emotional manipulation is the price you have to pay for all my natural brilliance."

### ***Later that night ...***

After the reception, Ron and Jim were walking back to their dorm with full stomachs.

"Hey, Ron," Jim asked. "You're not mad at Harry, are you?"

Ron looked at him in confusion. "Why would I be mad at Harry? He said what you needed to hear to get over the Dementor attack."

“Yeah, but he only did it to get me to lend him the Cloak.”

Ron snorted. “Come on, Jim. You know it was more than that. Harry really does care about you and really was concerned about you. The fact that he decided to get something he wanted while in the process of helping you doesn’t change any of that.”

“It doesn’t?” Jim said with some amusement. “So it doesn’t bug you to see Harry being manipulative like that? Even with me?”

“Jim, after last year? It would be *beyond hypocritical* of me to complain about Slytherins manipulating people so long as they’re not trying to hurt them in the process. Besides, Harry’s one of the good guys. It would be a good thing for everyone if he ended up running the showdown in the Slytherin dungeons.”

Jim nodded agreeably. “Yeah, I can see that. Give him a few years, and Harry will be the King of Slytherin.”

“Prince,” Ron said distractedly.

“What?” Jim asked.

“Eh?” Ron answered in confusion.

“You said Harry would be Slytherin’s Prince instead of its King. What does that mean?”

Ron opened his mouth but then stopped, his brow furrowing in confusion. From somewhere deep in the recesses of his mind, the boy suddenly recalled a brief snippet of conversation in the form of sibilant hisses produced by two strangely familiar voices that echoed along the walls of a huge sunken chamber. But then, as

quickly as it emerged, the memory was gone again. Ron shrugged.

“Honestly, I haven’t the faintest clue why I said that.” But then, he frowned. “But I have the oddest feeling that it’s going to be important somehow.”

## Chapter End Notes

HAPPY HALLOWEEN!

UPDATE SCHEDULE!

November 4, 2018 - Preview of next chapter uploaded to The Sinister Man's website and available to Discord members. Check my author page for links.

November 8, 2018 - Next chapter of my novel, Strangers In Boston, uploaded to The Sinister Man's website and available to patrons. Check my author page for links.

November 11, 2018 - Next chapter uploaded to The Sinister Man's website and available to Discord members. Check my author page for links.

November 14, 2018 - Next chapter uploaded to this site and to AO3.

AN 1: In addition to the Discord site and the [REDACTED] site for my patrons, my Author Page also has links to the POS Wiki and the POS TV Tropes. We may even have a Reddit page by now, though such mysteries elude me.

# **Interlude No 1**

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

# **\*Chapter 107\*: HP&DEM24 - Interlude No 1**

***Harry Potter  
and the Death Eater Menace***

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## ***CHAPTER 24: Interlude No. 1***

***18 December 1993  
Poolside at the Hotel Grand Sol, Ibiza***

Johnny took another sip of his mojito as he watched the parade of oiled and tanned girls slinking around in their bikinis as the sun dipped down over the Ibiza skyline towards the Mediterranean. While he was enjoying the view, Johnny increasingly found himself disappointed and depressed that so few of the young women were returning his glances. He was still good-looking and in excellent shape, but Johnny had just turned 31, and on Ibiza, 31 might as well have been a rotting corpse in the eyes of the club kids who came to experience the island's legendary decadence. While an unpleasant thought to consider, Johnny was forced to admit that it was a sentiment he probably shared when he was that young. Not that he personally had many memories to support such an assumption.

When Johnny was just 17 and living in America, he and his parents had been in a terrible car wreck. Johnny himself



remembered nothing about the accident – unsurprising as the accident had caused significant brain damage and left him in a coma for two years. Luckily, he suffered almost no physical damage, but when he awoke two years later, he discovered that he'd lost *all* his memories from before the accident. In the twelve years since Johnny had never been able to recall *anything* from his pre-crash life. He'd been *told* a great deal, but he *remembered* nothing, and when he looked at pictures of his deceased parents, they were strangers for whom he felt not the tiniest connection. Well, except for gratitude, he supposed. Johnny's late parents, Richard and Jane Janosky of Kenosha, Wisconsin, had left him a sizeable inheritance after the accident, and other than his retrograde amnesia, he was perfectly healthy. Specifically, he was at that time a perfectly healthy 19-year-old with a multi-million-dollar trust fund to cover all his living expenses but no living relatives or friends to counsel him against moving to the party capital of Europe where he could drink cocktails by the pool and chase girls (and when he was sufficiently drunk or bored, boys) forever.

But that was twelve years ago, and after more than a decade of sex, drugs, and Eurotrash techno music, Johnny was becoming jaded. Life on Ibiza meant seeing humanity at its most alluring but also at its most vapid and banal, and at 31, Johnny had settled into a constant state of vague misanthropy. Not quite a feeling that he was better than anyone else. It was more like Johnny was average ... and most people *still* managed to be his inferiors. He knew that by this point he was simply wasting his time on Ibiza in the futile hope that someone on his level would walk through the door.

And then, someone did.

She was older than every other woman in the pool area by far. Hell, Johnny was pretty sure she was older than *him*, and he was probably the oldest person at the hotel who wasn't on staff. But somehow that only heightened her allure, because she was not only beautiful but confident. *Supremely* confident. And *man* could she fill out what was easily a \$500 bathing suit. So much so that Johnny could only smirk as some of the more notorious studs around the pool moved towards her to offer a drink only to step aside slack-jawed at a haughty turn of her head. Johnny wondered what on earth a goddess like this could possibly want in a place like this. He was stunned when he finally realized it was *him*. As the woman moved gracefully towards his table, Johnny rose and pulled out a chair for her without really understanding the impulse. She smiled at him, and suddenly, he felt a strange quivering in his stomach. And also about twelve inches lower. Suddenly, Johnny was quite glad he'd rejected the local men's fashion of tight speedos in favor of baggy swimming trunks.

"You have good manners," she said in a lyrical voice. "I had despaired of finding anyone on this miserable island about whom that could be said."

Johnny smiled back with more confidence than he felt. He felt quite certain that she was out of his league, but fate had led her to him, it seemed, so he would do the best he could to get her into bed anyway. If nothing else, he was enjoying the jealous looks he was presently getting from all the other guys who'd been too intimidated to even speak to her.

"My mother used to say '*Manners maketh the man*,'" he replied casually as he produced a lighter to light the cigarette she'd just produced from her bag. She took a long drag on the cigarette and then breathed the smoke out in a

manner somehow more sensual than Johnny had ever imagined possible. He gulped despite himself.

"Did she really?" the woman said with some strange amusement, though Johnny couldn't tell what was so funny. For a moment, he honestly couldn't think of a single thing to say before he finally remembered the rules of basic social interaction.

"Johnny's the name," he said with a slight stammer that he covered with his most charming smile. "Johnny Janosky."

"My, how ... alliterative." There it was again, Johnny thought. A strange amusement, as if she were toying with him. Johnny shrugged.

"Johnny's not actually my given name," he said. "But I hate that name and never use it. Johnny and Janosky sound enough alike to get by. And you are?"

She took another drag on the cigarette, and then breathed out three perfect rings. Johnny blushed and adjusted his seating position slightly in response.

"Narcissa," she finally said. "Though my *best* friends call me *Cissy*."

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### ***Later in Johnny's extravagantly overpriced suite ...***

Two hours later, Johnny had apparently made it all the way to *best friend* status, as he and Cissy had made it back to his hotel suite to engage in the most mind-blowing sex he had ever experienced. Thirty minutes after that, Johnny woke up and was mortified to realize that he'd actually fallen asleep after they were both done. (Well, after *he* was done, at least. He certainly *hoped* that he'd satisfied the

older woman.) Or possibly, he simply passed out from sheer exhaustion. Either way, Cissy wasn't in his bed when he regained consciousness. He slammed his head back against his pillow in frustration, furious that he'd blown his chances with someone as incredible as her. But then, he heard a sound from the living area like a chair being dragged across the floor. Instantly, he hopped out of bed and pulled his boxers back on before going to investigate. To his surprise, Cissy was there, now fully-attired in a fashionable cocktail dress that showed off every curve. Standing next to her was the recliner which had been repositioned for some reason.

"Have a seat, Johnny," she said imperiously. "The lovemaking is done for now – not bad, by the way, all things considered – but it's really time for us to talk business."

"Business?" he said in confusion before his face went pale and his eyes widened. "Oh my God, you're a high-class prostitute! Listen, I never offered you any money or anything, so this is *pure entrapment!*"

She laughed. "Oh Johnny, I do find you charming like this. I hope some of this facet of you survives what's going to happen next."

He took a step back. "Um ... what *is* going to happen next?"

She didn't answer at first. Instead, she opened her purse and reached inside. Johnny nearly made a break for it, certain that she was going to pull out a gun. But to his surprise, she instead pulled out ... a stick. And even more surprisingly, the stick looked like it was too long to have fit in the tiny clutch purse in the first place!

"Do you have any idea what this is, Johnny?" she asked with a smirk.

"... a stick, I guess?" he said cautiously. She laughed.

"Yes, Johnny. It's a stick." And then, Cissy barked out strange words in some language foreign to Johnny even as she gestured sharply with the wooden rod in her hand. And to the man's shock, he was lifted bodily off the ground and rudely dropped onto the recliner before thick ropes appeared from nowhere and tied him down onto it. Quite understandably, Johnny Janosky freaked the hell out.

"WHAT THE FUCK! WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK JUST HAPPENED!" he screamed. Then, Cissy swished her *magic stick* again (**SILENCIO!**) and he was suddenly unable to speak.

"Johnny," she said patiently as if talking to a child. "There are things we need to discuss, and that's not going to be possible if you insist on throwing a tantrum. Now, will you speak civilly if I remove my silencing spell?"

He nodded in terror as she flicked her wand again.

"Sp-spell?" he stammered. "You mean ... a *magic* spell?"

"But of course!" Narcissa Black answered as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "What other kinds of spell are there worth talking about? I am a witch, this is my magic wand, and it allows me to cast spells."

"Is that how you got me to bring you home? You put some kind of love spell on me with that thing?"

She laughed. "Oh, you poor summer child. I hardly needed any magic at all to get you to take me home with you. Certainly, nothing that required a wand. Just my ... allure. Mind you, it's hardly a natural allure. Rather, it's the product of a gift I received many years ago from a French

Veela." She paused as if considering what she'd just said. "Well, I suppose '*gift*' isn't the right word to describe certain internal organs removed after the pitiful creature's death. I mean, there was hardly anything voluntary on her part. Perhaps it would be more accurate to call it a *contribution* instead."

She focused her attention on Johnny. "Did you understand any of that, my poppet?"

Johnny swallowed painfully. "I think ... I think there was some woman ... or maybe something like a woman ... called a Veela. And you killed her for something about her that you used to make yourself ... *ultra-sexy*?" he finished lamely. Narcissa smirked in response.

"Well done, Johnny. To be completely accurate, I didn't personally kill the Veela. My parents paid someone else to do it and prepare the elixir that required her ... *contribution*. It was a graduation present for passing all my NEWTs. But still, well done! And I was so afraid that your time here in this den of iniquity would have diminished your powerful intellect. Twelve OWLs, wasn't it?"

"What?" he asked in confusion. "I don't ... nevermind. What do you want from me? Are ... are you going to kill me like you did that Veela woman?"

"Yes," she said plainly. Instantly, Johnny gave out a loud sob. "And no!" she continued almost cheerfully. "I suppose whether what happens next can be considered '*killing*' really depends on one's point of view."

By this point, Johnny was openly weeping in terror. "Please! I don't ... what do you want with *me*?! Do you want money? What do you want?!"

"I want *you* ... Bartholomew Janosky."

"Don't call me that!" Johnny spat out. "I hate that name!"

"Oh?" she said in mock surprise. "Shall I christen you with another name instead?" Slowly, she moved around behind the crying, terrified man.

"I'm sure you've had a grand vacation here in this filthy Muggle fleshpot, my poppet. But playtime is over. You're needed now." Then, she bent down to whisper in his left ear.

*"You've slept long enough, Mr. January. Time to wake up."*

And Bartholomew "Johnny" Janosky **screamed** as his mind was ripped apart. Despite the heavy ropes, he thrashed wildly in his chair from the pain of every single memory he'd acquired over the last fourteen years getting ripped out, disassembled, sifted, and discarded by someone else. Someone who had slumbered for a long, long time but who was now awake and angry and *ravenous*.

"IT HURTS!" he bellowed at the top of his lungs.

"I know, poppet, I know," she said with false sympathy. "I had a child once, so I know how painful birth can be. I can only imagine that *rebirth* is so much worse."

He screamed again, and in response, someone in the next room started banging on the connecting wall and yelling in an angry Spanish voice. Without ever taking her eyes off Johnny, Narcissa flicked her wand towards the disturbance. There was a brilliant red flash that passed right through the wall - an incredibly illegal but highly-effective Muggle-slaying curse she'd found in the Black Library when she was 12 - and the belligerent Spanish words on the other side were instantly cut off by a wet gurgle followed by the

sound of a body falling to the ground in more than a dozen pieces.

Finally, Johnny gave out one last bellow of agony, rage, and despair. It was the final desperate scream of someone who knew he was dying and utterly powerless to prevent it and who *didn't even know why*. Then, he ceased all noise and sagged down in the chair, his head lolling down to his chest. Narcissa carefully knelt and gently put a hand on his knee.

"Mr. January? Are you with us?" she whispered.

The man who had been a rich, oversexed-but-basically-decent American orphan named Johnny Janosky for the last fourteen years raised his head up and peered deeply into her eyes. She peered back and was pleased. Johnny's amiable expression was gone, replaced by a bitter and cold countenance with just a hint of homicidal madness. It was a face that promised endless suffering to anyone who defied his Master's will ... or who simply crossed his path on a wrong day.

"I'm with you," said Barty Crouch Jr. with a commanding sneer. "What does he want me to do?"

## Chapter End Notes

AN 1: Obviously, this is a shorter update than I've done in years, but I've had to do an insane amount of traveling that kept me from doing the Snape-Harry focused chapter that I'd planned for today. And I really needed to put this sequence in somewhere but could never figure out where it was going to fit. Despite its shortness, it's inspired some very interesting discussion over at the Sinister Man's discord page. You can find a link to that, along with the POS wiki and TV Tropes



pages as well as to my original fiction, on my author page.

AN 2: Update Schedule (barring unexpected calamity).

Nov 21 – the next chapter of Strangers In Boston at my website for Patrons.

Nov 25(ish) – Chapter 108 of POS at my website available free to all Discord members.

Nov 28 – Chapter 108 of POS here and on AO3.

And then the holidays will probably screw everything up.

AN 3: Thanks to my crack editors at the Discord POS-Editorial chat: patronus, Imperialanirudh, FeatherMinx, and (of course) the indescribable Ozzie.

# **Dreamscapes, Memories, and Nightmares (Pt 1)**

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### ***Harry Potter and the Death Eater Menace***

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### ***CHAPTER 25: Dreamscapes, Memories, and Nightmares (pt 1)***

#### ***Many years ago ...***

*Cautiously, Severus Snape made his way down the dark passageway, his Lumos spell the only dim source of light. A part of him still thought this was a bad idea, that Black had only given him the secret to bypassing the Whomping Willow so that he and his fellow miscreants could trap him with a sneak attack and do .... Well, he wasn't entirely sure what they could do that was worse than stripping him in the Courtyard in front of dozens of classmates. Then again, the Head Boy had intervened before he could be completely denuded. Perhaps their plan now was to complete the job - capture him (four-on-one like the cowards they were) and send him running back to the Slytherin dorms like a Muggle stalker.*

*Still, this was his best chance to catch the accursed Marauders in something so blatantly illegal that*

*Dumbledore would have no choice but to expel or at least suspend them. Perhaps with them out of the way, Lily might ....*

*"No," he thought grimly. "She will never forgive me."*

*Still, if he could ruin Potter somehow, at least he could be spared the final indignity of watching Lily Evans date the wretched swine. He had no idea how Potter could have finally worn Lily down into going out with him – he suspected potions – but if the rumors were true, the two would be going to Hogsmeade together in a week's time. Admittedly, it was quite petty for Snape to go to such lengths to keep Lily and Potter apart. But despite Lily's rejection of him, Snape simply could not bear the thought of her throwing her future away for a reprobate who would most likely steal her virginity in a squalid broom cupboard ... along with her underwear (which according to some rumors, he collected from all his conquests).*

*Finally, in the dim light of his Lumos, Snape could see a doorway twenty feet up ahead. He moved towards it carefully until, to his surprise, he heard a voice calling out to him from behind. A hated voice he recognized at once.*

*"SNAPE!" yelled James Potter in an urgent and possibly terrified voice. "COME BACK! YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING!"*

*The Slytherin sneered. If Potter was here and insistent that he not proceed, then obviously, this wasn't a Marauder trap after all. He quickly darted ahead to the door, heedless of the panicked voice of James Potter who was sprinting up the passageway behind him.*

*"SNAPE! FOR MERLIN'S SAKE, STOP!!"*

*The Marauder was close behind, but not close enough.  
Snape grasped the handle of the door and pushed with all  
his might. The door flew open, and inside ....*

GREY FUR  
SHARP TEETH  
YELLOW EYES  
HUGE CLAWS  
HUNGRY, SO HUNGRY  
AND SO FULL OF RAGE  
MAD HOWLING  
CHARGING TOWARDS ME  
PLEASE, I DON'T WANT TO DIE!

***Now ...***

With a loud gasp, Snape shot up in bed. He sat there for several minutes as his heart rate and breathing slowed to normal. Then, he wiped the sweat from his brow and pulled himself out of bed, muttering curses as he did. It had been years since he'd had the nightmares. Indeed, he thought he'd finally gotten past them. But it seemed that merely hearing the details of a werewolf attack on nearby Hogsmeade had been enough to trigger them once more. A Muggle doctor would have described his condition as PTSD, but among wizarding healers, this specific night terror was known as *wolf-fear*. It was a well-documented aftereffect of surviving a werewolf attack without infection, as the supernatural fear induced by the beast lingered for years or decades. Only Animagi and fourth-tier Occlumens were immune. Had his own Occlumency been stronger back then, he might have resisted and been able to defend himself instead of curling up into a ball and relying on Potter – *fucking Potter!* – to save him. Instead, the wolf-fear dug its claws in deep within Snape's psyche, and it seemed no amount of psychic mastery could dislodge them for good.

That night wasn't the beginning or end of Snape's ruination, but it was certainly a factor. Not only had Dumbledore refused to punish his precious Marauders beyond giving Sirius Black a month of detention, he also forced Snape into an Unbreakable Vow never to reveal the secret of Remus Lupin's lycanthropy! After all these years, Snape still wasn't sure how that had happened, though he assumed the Headmaster had somehow taken advantage of him while he was still delirious from wolf-fear and trauma. If such oaths did not require completely willing participation, Snape might well have thought Dumbledore had Confunded him or worse.

But whatever oaths he'd been made to swear, he could still hold resentments. And he had. He almost didn't even apply for the Hogwarts Potions Master position after Slughorn's retirement announcement because it meant working under Dumbledore. And when he heard those fateful words from Trelawney, he fled straight to the Dark Lord in part because he feared what Dumbledore might do to keep the Prophecy a secret even before he learned that it applied to the Potters.

But that was in the past now. His relationship with Dumbledore was, if not warm then at least professional, forged as it had been through the fires of the last war. Right now, he needed to stay in the present, no matter how much Regulus Black's little conspiracy threatened to tear open old wounds. Thankfully, the conspirators had wisely concealed Snape's involvement from Sirius Black, but when that inevitably changed, Snape had made it clear that he would defend himself if attacked by his would-be murderer.

Slowly and stiffly, Snape made his way over to a nearby cabinet where he stored his usual remedies for the occasional wolf-fear nightmare. He eyed the two bottles

cautiously. One was a vial of Dreamless Sleep. The other was a bottle of Firewhiskey. He considered them carefully, for later that day he would be entering the mind of Bellatrix Lestranger, and he would need all his mental strength. With a resigned sigh, Severus Snape reached for the Firewhiskey.

*18 December 1993*

Hogsmeade

10:00 a.m.

While known for his austerity in most personal affairs, Rufus Scrimgeour had one well-known weakness of character: an affinity for fine chocolates. Today, that predilection led him to the famous Honeydukes candy shop in Hogsmeade. Officially, he and a half-dozen faculty members, were here to provide additional security for today's Hogsmeade weekend, even though only a fraction of the normal swarm of students were in town. Sadly, despite the best efforts of Scrimgeour and young Marcus Flint, only a handful of students could cast a Patronus strong enough to win permission to attend this Hogsmeade weekend.

Scrimgeour had just placed an order for a dozen chocolate-raspberry truffles when he paused and quickly looked around the room. A door leading downstairs to the storeroom was open now when it had not been before, yet there was no one nearby who had just passed through. With a glance, he counted the people in the store and then closed his eyes to listen. After a moment, he heard the sound of the bell that rang when the shop door opened, and he looked that way, noting with quiet satisfaction that the door seemed to stick for a moment before finally closing. The former Auror smiled rather smugly as he paid for his chocolates.

Ten minutes later, the door to one of the private rooms in the Three Broomsticks opened on its own. The person who wasn't there paused for a few seconds before cautiously and quietly entering the room. Suddenly, an arm appeared from nowhere with a wand in its hand.

***"EXPPELLIARMUS!"*** exclaimed Harry Potter. The flash of his spell sped across the room only to be parried by Moody who suddenly appeared out of nowhere as his Disillusionment spell ended.

***"ACCIO INVISIBILITY CLOAK!"*** Moody cast in response, but the cloak that Harry wore didn't respond to the Summoning Charm. Moody cursed under his breath and then jumped to one side to evade Harry's second disarming hex before taking him down with an overpowered Stunner. When Harry was revived a few minutes later, Moody had already removed the cloak from his body and was examining it.

"Impressive. The cloak that is, not you. You're still telegraphing your dodge direction even though I've told you about that repeatedly. So you somehow conned Wonder Boy into letting you borrow James's cloak?"

Harry sighed as he pulled himself up off the Floor. "No con jobs this time. He just let me borrow it. We *are* brothers, you know."

Moody snorted. "Yeah, and I also know how much affection there was between you two this time last year. How did you see through my Disillusionment?"

"I didn't," Harry answered. "I just aimed at the most boring surface in the room. I know it's hard to maintain Disillusionment while casting a spell. And even harder when you're trying to blend in with a complex background."

“Heh. Not bad. Seven out of ten.”

“Thanks. So why are you so interested in the family cloak?”

“Well one, I was just surprised you had it. And two, I was even more surprised that the rumors were true and it couldn’t be summoned. You blew an opening there, by the way. When I was wasting time trying to summon it off you, I was completely open to a Stunner or whatever else you wanted to try.”

“Unfortunately,” said Harry somewhat wistfully, “I didn’t know it was immune to summoning either. One of many conversations my father and I never had.”

“Don’t get maudlin, Potter. The poor deprived delinquent act will never get you anywhere with me.”

Harry chuckled. “Noted. And since I can’t guarantee when I’ll get the Potter Cloak again, when can I learn the Disillusionment Charm?”

Moody looked up at the ceiling as he considered the question. “Around Easter, I think. There are some preliminary stealth charms I want you to learn first that will make full-scale Disillusionment easier.” He tossed the cloak onto the bed before focusing his attention on the boy.

“Well, you’re here now. You still sure you want to do this? We could always spend the day working on other more practical things.”

“No. I understand that you think I’m too young ... but I need to see it. I need to see ... him.”

Moody nodded. “So did you bring it?”



Harry reached into his pocket to produce his shrunken Pensieve. Moody took it, expanded it, and set it on a nearby table. Then, he gestured with his wand and conjured a large bucket off to one side.

“What’s that for?” Harry asked in confusion.

“Vomit, Potter,” Moody said flatly. “You’re about to watch a lot of people die horribly. If you *don’t* get sick at least once, I will *really* start to wonder about your character and upbringing.”

Harry swallowed and walked up to the Pensieve as Moody poured the first vial of memories inside. Then, he paused and looked up at the grizzled veteran.

“By the way, can *you* see through the Potter cloak with that eye of yours?”

Moody snorted.

“*Pfft*. Like I would actually tell you if I could.”

## ***12 Grimmauld Place***

### ***1:00 p.m.***

“I still can’t see why you don’t want me to come along,” Sirius said petulantly. “I am a part of your little Horcrux-hunting conspiracy, aren’t I?”

Regulus frowned while pulling on his coat. “Yes, a sickly, near-invalid part. Also an annoying one. Anyway, all we’re doing today is standing guard while the Legilimens we hired tries to read the mind of dear cousin Bellatrix. There’s no need for you to be there for that. Besides, the Legilimens is very particular about his identity and doesn’t want anyone else to learn it. And if you did come along, you’d

probably make a bunch of bad jokes and get on everyone's nerves."

"Hey!" the older brother exclaimed. "I can be serious when I need to be." Then, he smirked. "Hell, I've been doing it my whole life!"

*"Exactly.* Honestly, I can't imagine why so many people find your refined sense of humor to be puerile and childish. And anyway, Harry will be by for a visit tomorrow. Don't you want to be well-rested for him?"

Sirius narrowed his eyes. "Now you're just trying to divert me for some reason."

"Stop being so paranoid, Sirius. It's unbecoming." With that, Regulus threw a pinch of powder into the newly reactivated Floo. "Longbottom Manor!" he said after stepping into the green flames. Behind him, Sirius glared at the Floo with a disgruntled expression.

Seconds later, Regulus stepped out of the fireplace in the Longbottom parlor. Augusta and Lucius were waiting for him while Snape sat in a chair on the far side of the room, apparently in meditation.

Regulus nodded at his co-conspirators. "So, are we ready to do this?"

"No," said Snape from across the room. "But I doubt I shall be better prepared anytime soon, so we'd best be about it."

With that, the Potions Master rose and made his way out of the parlor towards the secret dungeon where their prisoners were housed, the other three following behind. A few rooms away, Lady Augusta carefully adjusted a particular wall sconce causing a seamless segment of the

nearby wall to move aside, revealing a hidden door that led to the dungeon below. Moments later, the four had passed by three cells each containing an unconscious man under the effects of Draught of Living Death. From the last cell, *"Tip Toe Through the Tulips"* could be faintly heard. The fourth cell contained a female: Bellatrix Lestrange, the Dark Lord's most trusted assassin. Silently, Lucius and Regulus pulled the unconscious woman into a sitting position before conjuring a straitjacket around her. Then, Lucius produced a vial of the Living Death antidote and poured it down her throat. Seconds later, her eyes fluttered open, and the first face she saw was that of Severus Snape who had conjured a chair and sat down across from her.

"Snape!" she hissed angrily. But before she could say anything else, Regulus hit her with a Petrification Curse and she was frozen into place, her eyes wide. Regulus and Lucius both stepped out of the room as Snape leaned forward, his eyes locked onto those of the prisoner.

***"LEGILIMENS,"*** he said softly, and the interrogation began.

### ***The Fifth Memory***

Harry licked his lips nervously. He had not gotten sick yet, but he suspected that was just because Moody had started with the memories of the four people who'd fought Voldemort long enough to escape. Even then, the violence had been quite upsetting. All four had featured Aurors and Hit Wizards who Voldemort had targeted personally because they had arrested or killed prominent Death Eaters. And while they all escaped their duels with Voldemort, none of them did so without taking significant (and in a few cases, permanent) damage. Apparently, the Dark Lord's goal was to demoralize the enemy by making

them pay a high price for their opposition. But now, the two were about to start on the fifth memory – the last stand of Auror Herbert Burke Jr. during the Battle of Diagon Alley in April of 1976 – a conflict which Harry already knew would end with Burke’s courageous self-sacrifice that bought time for his fellow Aurors and many civilians to escape with their lives. Suddenly, Harry frowned and turned to Moody, who had accompanied him into the memories.

“Bones, Fawley, Shacklebolt, Abbot, and now Burke,” Harry said referring to the family names of the men and women featured in the first five memories. “They’re all Pureblood families, aren’t they? Four of them are in the Sacred Twenty-Eight, I think, and the fifth one probably should have been.”

“Correct,” Moody said. “Do you draw any conclusions from that?”

Harry considered. “One possibility, I guess, is that he took a special interest in killing people he considered blood traitors,” he said slowly.

Moody nodded. “Any other possibilities spring to mind?”

Harry looked up at the ex-Auror thoughtfully. “That despite his apparent Pureblood sympathies, Voldemort actually was happy to take out Purebloods on both sides of the war?”

Moody returned Harry’s gaze. “An interesting theory, Potter.”

Harry coughed delicately. “I, uh, had a conversation last year with Rufus Scrimgeour. He mentioned you’d advanced some conspiracy theories along those lines.”

“Did he indeed? Well, it’s true. By the end of the war, I was convinced that Death Eater murder victims fell into two categories. The ones where he just let his more psychotic followers go wild in order to terrify the populace. And the ones that were performed with exacting precision. The latter group *always* targeted Purebloods and usually targeted members of Wizengamot families, including some families that were considered Grey, and a few that quietly supported blood purism but weren’t openly supportive enough to satisfy Voldie.”

Harry absorbed that before turning his attention back to the frozen memory before him. It was in April of 1976 just a few hours after sunset, and the full moon hung low over Diagon Alley. Herbert Burke, Jr. – the white sheep of the Burke family – had been on patrol with five other Aurors when a pack of already-transformed werewolves led by Fenrir Greyback were Portkeyed into the Alley near its southern entryway. There were only about eight werewolves, but it would be enough to terrorize the Wizarding government into believing that the Dark Lord had some sort of control over the creatures, thus leading to several major amendments to the Werewolf Registration Act a year later. Greyback’s pack killed twenty-seven people and infected a dozen survivors in just the first three minutes of the attack before Aurors showed up. Thankfully, Moody had started the memory with Burke’s arrival on the scene, so Harry had been spared the sight of those savage killings.

Immediately, Burke took advantage of the fact that the transformed werewolves were nearly mindless. He had most of his Aurors cast protective shields down the sides of the street while he and a few others transfigured barrels into what appeared to be small children. Funneled by the shields straight down the street, the werewolves soon set

upon the “children” and began tearing them to bits, a sight which triggered a queasy rumbling in Harry’s stomach even though he knew they were fake. The true nature of Burke’s trap was revealed when the Aurors ended the transfiguration, and the werewolves suddenly found themselves ripping apart wooden barrels.

Specifically, barrels full of pine resin, pitch, creosote, and other sticky and *highly flammable* liquids that had been commandeered from a nearby potions supply shop.

A few quick Incendios later, the entire pack was howling in agony as the viscous materials now stuck in their fur were set ablaze. That might well have been the end of Fenrir Greyback had the entire pack not suddenly disappeared with a loud pop. Surprised, Burke and his fellow Aurors looked around the now empty street for other hostiles.

They found only one.

He’d made no sound as he Apparated in, a feat that Harry simply added to the mystery that was Voldemort. The Dark Lord stood in the middle of Diagon Alley, about fifty feet from the Aurors. He wore night black robes that extended all the way to the ground, with a large hood that concealed his face and long heavy sleeves for the arms that were crossed in front of him almost as if he were in prayer. And despite the distance, there was no problem in understanding his voice as he calmly spoke to Burke.

“Your strategy was inspired, Auror Burke. You are as cunning as any Slytherin. Are you sure you will not rethink your rejection of my offer to....”

“***BOMBARDA MAXIMA!***” Burke cried out before Voldemort could even finish his invitation to change sides. A massive explosion at least twenty feet across lit up the Alley

where the Dark Lord had been standing. But seconds later, the smoke and fire cleared to reveal Voldemort standing unharmed, his wand out casually to the side, and his hood thrown back to reveal the inhuman serpentine face that would haunt Harry's nightmares.

*"A wordless Protego strong enough to block a Bombarda Maxima!"* Harry realized with shock. And then he noticed something even more disturbing, for the Dark Lord was actually *smiling* as if pleased with Burke's resistance.

"As you wish, Auror Burke. **AVADA KEDAVRA!**" And again, Harry marveled. He'd seen Voldemort's Killing Curse in the previous memories, but never as fast as here. From his lessons with Moody, he'd learned many details about the Unforgiveable. Though deceptively simple in both incantation and wand movement, it was actually very precise in how the two needed to fit together. The curse also required considerable personal power compared to most spells (to say nothing of its esoteric requirement of hating someone enough to trigger homicidal rage in the first place). It was an experienced user who could cast the Killing Curse in less than two seconds, and an exceptionally powerful user who could cast it *again* in less than a minute without growing weak from the strain. Voldemort could do it in less than one second and then recast it easily after only a few seconds of recovery time.

Despite the Dark Lord's speed, Burke was able to narrowly evade the initial attack by feinting right and then flinging himself to the left. Immediately, the other five Aurors opened up on the Dark Lord with their deadliest legal curses, and Harry recalled that this battle took place before the Auror Corps was permitted to use Unforgiveables. Indeed, this battle was in large part *why* the Auror Corps would be permitted to use Unforgiveables. For while all of

the Aurors' spells struck home, none of them could penetrate Voldemort's shield. Finally, as if bored by the proceedings, Voldemort pointed his wand straight up and *hissed*. Harry paled and struggled to keep emotion from his face, for he had no desire to let his teacher know he was a Parselmouth and thus knew exactly what spell Voldemort was using: *Serpensortia Horribilis* augmented by the power of Parselmagic.

There was a brief sickly green light that flashed across the night sky, illuminating the darkened alley in its emerald glow. And then, *it rained cobras*. Dozens, even scores of the deadly venomous serpents fell down onto the street and instantly went on the offensive at their master's hissed commands. Horrified, Auror Burke cried out instructions to his fellow Aurors who were desperately trying to defend themselves against the serpentine horde.

"EVACUATE THE CIVILIANS! I'LL HOLD HIM OFF!"

And as he cried out those orders, the Auror ran towards the patch of still-flaming liquids in the center of the street ... and then jumped *into* it. Stabbing his wand into the very heart of the flames even as his own robes began to catch fire, Burke gave a mighty roar before raising his wand up and thrusting it towards Voldemort. In response, all the flaming liquid on the street rose up and blasted towards the enemy even as Burke cried out an incantation.

**"ENGORGIO MAXIMUM!"** Instantly, the liquid, which by this point was essentially wizarding napalm, doubled and then quadrupled in volume.

Voldemort didn't even flinch. He simply stood his ground until the fire was almost upon him before thrusting his wand into the vanguard of the flames at the last possible second. And instantly, the *entire mass* of napalm, consisting



of thousands of gallons of burning liquid, simply turned to water ... and then to *ice*, leaving a gargantuan frozen crystalline structure suspended in mid-air above Diagon Alley as much in defiance of gravity as of all the established laws of Transfiguration.

*"... impossible,"* the now-exhausted Burke said weakly, oblivious to the popping sounds of his fellow Aurors fleeing, carrying with them every civilian incapable of Apparition. Those would be his last coherent words, as at that moment a cobra bit into his calf. He fell to the ground screaming in agony, and at Voldemort's hissed commands, a quartet of cobras each grabbed one of his limbs to hold him immobile.

"Does it hurt much, Auror Burke? The bite of a cobra?" Voldemort said as he casually moved towards the fallen man. "Permit me to give you some perspective on the matter. **CRUCIO!**"

At that, Harry had to look away from the sight of the doomed man as he screamed and writhed on the ground. Sickeningly, he realized that the hissing sounds made by the four cobras binding him were, to his ears, the sounds of laughter not unlike that of Nidhogg when he was particularly amused by another's cruelty.

"Your heroism does you credit, Auror Burke. Were you a Gryffindor? A Hufflepuff? No matter. Sadly, such heroism is only a path to martyrdom, a path only fools take. But at least your suffering will be brief."

Voldemort knelt at the side of poor Burke who was still moaning incoherently, and he placed his wand just a few inches above the man's head. Then, as if to show his contempt by drawing out the proceedings, Voldemort cast the Killing Curse once more, only this time with a deliberate

and exaggerated slowness. There was a flash of light, and Herbert Burke Jr. went still and silent. Then, Voldemort rose and regarded the scene. That whole area was a veritable sea of deadly snakes, but there were six people still alive, though the cobra bites they'd already suffered meant they wouldn't last for much longer. Still, it was apparently too long for Voldemort's taste. Five blindingly fast Killing Curse's later, there was only one left, a female Auror who'd only taken a few snake bites before casting a shield over herself but who was too weak to apparate away. Voldemort glided towards her, dismissing the army of snakes with one swipe of his wand and shattering her shield with a second. Weakly, she raised her wand in Voldemort's direction, but a third wordless gesture sent it flying.

He pointed his wand at the woman's center-mass and she closed her eyes while waiting to die. But to Harry's surprise, Voldemort instead cast a healing charm designed to neutralize snake venom. Her pain diminishing, the Auror opened her eyes in surprise and looked up at the Dark Lord, confused by his apparent mercy.

"You will live, woman, at least for now. There should be a witness to testify as to Herbert Burke's heroism ... and to how futile and pointless it was against my power. I have selected you to be that witness." He tilted his head slightly, and the corners of his lips rose sardonically. "Sadly, having witnessed firsthand the power of Lord Voldemort, I fear any future sights would only pale in comparison. And so, I shall free you from the burden of such disappointment."

Then, Voldemort hissed out a word that Harry didn't recognize, and the woman screamed in agony as her eyes swelled in their sockets before *exploding out of them*. And with that, Harry had finally reached his limit. He staggered back and put his hand over his mouth. Swiftly, Moody

grabbed his other arm and guided him out of the memory with the high-pitched laughter of the Dark Lord echoing behind them. The boy barely made it to the bucket in time.

After a few minutes of vomiting (and a few tears to his embarrassment), Harry got hold of himself. Moody handed him a wet towel and a glass of water and then directed him to a chair.

“Do you need a Calming Draught?” he asked softly.

“No ... maybe. Just give me a second.” Harry rubbed the wet towel over his face, as much to wipe away the tears as to clean off the sick. Intellectually, he knew that it was important to allow himself to feel emotions even at times like this, but that did not make the *desire* to block them out recede.

“The woman, the auror he allowed to live....”

“Nancy Kent. Half-blood. Gryffindor Class of ‘74. Just a year out of the Academy when this happened. The Healers concluded that the bastard hit her with the Conjunctivitis Curse augmented by Parseltongue.” Moody paused diplomatically. “You begin to understand, I hope, why so much of Wizarding Britain has an almost hysterical fear of Parseltongue now?”

Harry nodded without looking up.

“Anyway, the inclusion of Parseltongue made the curse impossible to reverse with any magic the healers knew. Kent was rendered completely and permanently blind. She was able to give a Pensieve memory of the attack – as Voldie *intended* – but she never recovered from the trauma. She took her own life in November of 1981, ironically the day

after hearing that Voldemort had been destroyed by your brother.”

“So,” Moody continued, “what have we learned so far?”

Harry sniffed and shook his head as he tried to absorb everything he’d seen. “That Voldemort is *insanely* powerful and can’t be beat in a duel unless you’re Albus Dumbledore?”

Moody practically growled at that. “Have I been wasting my time with you, Potter? I told you before that I wasn’t training you to beat Voldie but to *survive* him. If you haven’t been paying attention to those lessons, we might as well have spent the last few hours working on prep for your OWLs. Now again, what have you learned that’s relevant to the topic of *survival*?”

Harry wiped his face again. Then, he closed his eyes and thought – *really* thought – about the memories he’d been shown. Suddenly, he opened his eyes almost in surprise.

“Feint in one direction and then dodge to the other,” he said with authority. “That’s what all the people so far who survived Voldemort’s first Killing Curse did.”

“Close, Potter. Eight out of ten. But I can show you scores of memories in which victims tried that unsuccessfully. You’ve seen how fast Voldie is. You must realize how hard it is to just dodge him like that. The *real* secret is to feint in one direction and *keep it up until he commits to his spell*. And since he’s so fast, it’s *really hard* to do that and still reverse direction in time to dodge the curse.”

Harry thought about that. “I also noticed that four of the five we’ve seen so far moved right and then dodged left. Is that significant?”

Moody actually gave what for him was a smile. "Getting better, Potter. Nine out of ten that time. Voldemort's right-handed. His technique with the Killing Curse is immaculate, and if the target is stationary, he generally hits center-mass perfectly, usually right through the breastbone. But if the target is moving to his right, he will naturally try to lead with his shot. An analysis of victims he killed while they were on the move showed that he struck off-center to the right about 60% of the time, so moving right-then-left should logically allow you to dodge at that rate if you can time it right."

"That's ... not great odds," Harry said dubiously.

Moody shrugged. "We're talking about going up against the deadliest dark wizard in living memory. You take what advantages you can get."

Harry considered that, and suddenly, his face adopted a rueful expression, as if he regretted what he was about to ask.

"Mr. Moody, what do you know about ... Wu Xi Do?"

Moody seemed nonplussed. "... apparently nothing. Tell me more."

### ***Meanwhile, in the mind of a madwoman ...***

The few hours of Snape's intrusion were surprisingly straightforward. Naturally, he was unable to penetrate directly into the core of Bellatrix Lestrange's self which was encased in a minefield of psychic traps and shields. But while the number and scope of those traps and shields were excessive, he had thus far not found any which were beyond his experience and knowledge. Snape did not know whether to be relieved, disappointed, or concerned - he

had expected something more exotic in one of Augustus Rookwood's *personal projects* than he'd encountered so far. About twenty minutes later, the Legilimens had finally disarmed the last of the exterior defenses that barred his way before projecting his mind deeper into that of his subject.

The feeling of weightlessness and ethereality that accompanied entry-level Legilimency fell away, and Snape became aware of the sensation of having a body again even though he knew that such sensations were illusory. He closed his (illusory) eyes for a moment and allowed his other (illusory) senses to come to the fore. Satisfied that there were no cognitohazards nearby, Snape opened his eyes, looked around ... and blinked in surprise.

"Well," he thought to himself, "*I suppose that counts as ... exotic.*"

The fact that Snape was nude was not particularly surprising under the circumstances, and with a casual thought, he altered his psychic avatar to include his customary black robes. He stood on a gravel path that cut through a snow-covered field, which was not the starting point that Snape had expected for this journey, but neither was outside the range of his expectations. But what *did* stand out as highly unusual was where the journey seemed to lead. For up ahead on the path was not some kind of dwelling as he'd expected but rather what appeared to be a truly massive wall of boxwood trees that reached up fifty feet or more into the sky and off in either horizontal direction as far as the eye could see. The trees were interconnected with thick brambles, nettles, thorn bushes, and other hedge plants that made the wall seem impenetrable. The pathway led right up to the edge of the

wall before terminating in front of what looked like two identical passageways cut through the hedge.

Rather more troubling, Snape thought, was that the two passageways were guarded by two gigantic trolls each armed with double-bladed axes that were longer than he was tall. The situation did not improve when Snape drew closer and realized that the trolls looked like misshapen imitations of Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrange. Snape approached cautiously but confidently. A psychic representation of a troll was likely a powerful defense, but in this context, he could use Sectumsempra or even the Killing Curse as a manifestation of his own will, thus evening the odds. But presently, neither troll seemed intent on attacking. Snape drew nearer, and when he was within fifteen feet of the two passageways, a high shrieking voice called out from everywhere and nowhere.

*"Ahahahahaha! Itsy-bitsy Sevie-poo thinks he can walk willy-nilly into my mind, does he?"* cackled the mad voice of Bellatrix Lestrange, who truly had been driven insane by her Azkaban experiences. *"Well, Sevie-poo, let's see if you're as clever as you think you are. My Roddy and Rabby guard the ingress and will kill you if you choose the wrong door. You may ask a question of one of my boys. One will answer true and the other false. Or you could just let them kill you now if your wits aren't up to my little challenge. Ahahahaha!"*

Snape's lip curled up in contempt. It was a child's riddle he'd solved at the age of nine. The correct solution was simply to ask either of the guardians which doorway *the other* would identify as the safe path. The nature of the scenario ensured that the guardian asked would always choose the *unsafe* path, as either the true guardian would repeat the false guardian's untruth or the false guardian

would lie about the true guardian's correct response. The true safe path would then be whichever one *wasn't* chosen. If Snape had still been a child, he would have been proud of solving the puzzle. But seven years in Slytherin followed by another fifteen as a spy had taught him to look past obvious solutions no matter how clever. In this case, his experience immediately led him to notice the non-obvious question: *Why would anyone other than an idiot provide a clue for how to penetrate their own defenses?*

With that realization, Snape ignored both the doors and the trolls who guarded them and expanded his legilimency senses. Then, he calmly marched right up to the space on the wall *between* the two doors and then straight *into* the wall. As anticipated, the sharp thorns and nettles fell back at his approach, for he had noticed that the plants in that patch of wall were Nervous Nettles, a breed often incorporated into magical hedge mazes specifically to conceal hidden passages because they would only withdraw from someone who intentionally went straight for them. And sure enough, there was indeed a hidden third passageway which he entered without incident.

Snape hoped the rest of the traps and diversions ahead could be so easily circumvented, but somehow, he doubted it. The passageway he'd entered was narrow, and while it cleared a path for him, he had to move slowly and carefully, for he soon realized that after a few feet into the passage, the Nervous Nettles were quickly overgrown by other, more dangerous stinging plants, some of which he did not recognize.

*"Assuming they're even real plants incorporated from Bellatrix's memories," he thought ruefully. "And not fantasy plants concocted out of her nightmares."*



Sure enough, just as that cheery thought passed through Snape's head, he moved just a bit too fast and caught his hand on a long sharp thorn. He hissed in pain and then froze, as he heard a man's angry yell from somewhere nearby followed by a woman's scream of terror. He wondered if it was one of Bellatrix's memories before his face went pale. It was not Bellatrix's memory that had been summoned but his own. The poison in the thorn was causing him to remember one of his parents' many arguments. Specifically, one from his early childhood that ended with his mother in hospital with a fractured jaw.

He closed his eyes and concentrated both on the pain from his hand and the pain from the memory. Carefully, he examined the psychic connection between the two before gently severing it. The voices faded away, but Snape was unnerved by how easily the psychic poison bypassed his defenses. He would have to be even more cautious now, as sustained injuries might incapacitate him or worse despite his psychic skills.

After about twenty feet, the passageway abruptly forked, and when his legilimency senses provided no guidance, he simply went to the right. When the path forked again, he turned once more only to quickly find a dead end. Snape grimaced in frustration. Apparently, this mental defense manifested as a maze of dangerous psychic plants, a fact brought home when he was caught by another poisonous nettle while trying to backtrack. This time, the induced memory was of when he received his Hogwarts letter at age eleven ... and of the beating he took from Tobias Snape afterwards. Even more troubling was the fact that the pain of the memory-beating lingered on Snape's psychic avatar even after he'd neutralized the attack. He wondered if the nature of this defense could cause actual *physical* harm to his body.

Then, Snape froze in place at a sudden horrible realization before closing his eyes to assess the seriousness of his mistake. For what he had suddenly realized was that in his zeal to defend himself from the psychic hazards in the maze bushes, he had committed an elementary dunderheaded mistake, one he should have been on guard for, and one which might yet prove fatal.

He had treated the maze as if it *truly* were an actual maze instead of a mental construct, thereby submitting himself to the reality imposed by what was, in truth, nothing but a hostile idea.

Unfortunately, that mistake, once committed, was nearly unalterable. At this point, he was into Lestranger's mindscape too deep to even try imposing his own will upon it. He had only two options now. He could reject this false reality and withdraw completely knowing that the Death Eater's psychic defences would only grow stronger. For it is the nature of such defences to study their intruders as much as the intruders study them. Or he could press on knowing that the ideas he would encounter would be far more real and deadly than anything he'd seen thus far.

### ***Meanwhile in reality ...***

Lucius pulled out a gold pocket watch to check it. "He's been in there for longer than the first two times."

"Yes," answered Regulus quietly. "He expected as much given the nature of defences he'd anticipated her having."

"Still, are we to wait here all day? Draco will be returning from Durmstrang tomorrow. I still have preparations to make."

Regulus sniffed. "I thought that's what you kept house elves for, even if you sold one of them to Harry Potter. As for Severus, this will take as long as it takes. We have no way to contact him about his progress that would not be a distraction to him, perhaps a fatal one. So, we wait. As for your homecoming fete, Augusta will be back from her errands in a few hours. She can take over your watch if you want."

Lucius considered that. "No, no. Severus and I go back too far for me to leave him to his fate now. I will stay here to make sure he remains undisturbed."

Regulus nodded at that, oblivious to the nature of the disturbance that had just arrived via the parlor Floo. For as the green flames died down, the new arrival brushed the soot from his shoulders and then cautiously looked around, at once both pleased but also somewhat put-out that no one had responded to his presence.

Sirius Black did so love to make an entrance.

***Next: Harry sees another side of James Potter and learns why Voldemort feared Albus Dumbledore, while Sirius sticks his nose where it doesn't belong, and Snape travels farther into the heart of Bellatrix's darkness.***

*AN 1: Update Schedule*

11/28 (today) - Ch 108 of POS.

12/5 - Next chapter of Strangers In Boston, available to Patrons through TheSinisterMan(dot)Com

12/9(ish) - Ch 109 of POS, available to Discord followers through TheSinisterMan(dot)Com

12/12 - Ch 109 of POS, here and at AO3.

***AN 2: Thanks again to my awesome editors at the Discord POS-Editorial chat: Aich, patronus, Imperialanrudh, FeatheryMinx, Black Stag, and the indefatigable Ozzie.***

***AN 3: And thanks also to my awesome followers, as we have broken the 10k Reviews barrier and are approaching 10k Favorites and 11k Followers!***

## Chapter End Notes

Next: Harry sees another side of James Potter and learns why Voldemort feared Albus Dumbledore, while Sirius sticks his nose where it doesn't belong, and Snape travels farther into the heart of Bellatrix's darkness.

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# **Dreamscapes, Memories, and Nightmares (pt 2)**

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### ***HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATH EATER MENACE***

***Harry Potter and all associate characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.***

### ***CHAPTER 26: Dreamscapes, Memories, and Nightmares (pt 2)***

*18 December 1993  
The Three Broomsticks  
2:30 p.m.*

After viewing the memory of the Battle of Diagon Alley, Harry Potter found the subsequent memories to be far less wrenching. Indeed, they were almost anticlimactic outside of the morbid aspect of watching several good people be murdered. When Harry asked about it, Moody admitted that he wanted to get the most violent and disturbing memory out of the way first. The Burke memory was the one with the most collateral damage and more importantly the only one with such atrocities as a rain of cobras or exploding eyeballs. The next few memories mainly featured Voldemort rather causally striking people down with a second or third Killing Curse after the victims had been lucky enough to dodge the first one or two. Harry noted that Moody's statistics seemed to hold true – fainting right

and then dodging left worked slightly more often than other tactics, if only for a few seconds. Compared to Burke, none of the duelists in those other memories came close to even inconveniencing Voldemort, though several, by their sacrifices, allowed others to escape the Dark Lord's wrath.

At around 2:30, Moody called for a break. The last memory he'd planned to show that day would be the duel between Voldemort and James Potter which (luckily for Harry's father) quickly turned into a duel between Voldemort and Albus Dumbledore, the only person to have decisively beaten Voldemort one-on-one. But extended Pensieve review was mentally draining, and Moody wanted Harry to be clear-headed for this last duel, so he told Harry to nip down invisibly to the loo on the first floor and freshen up while he picked up a couple of sandwiches from Madam Rosmerta.

Once downstairs, Harry was careful to avoid bumping into the few customers around, but he was surprised to see Minister Fudge sharing a table with Profs. McGonagall, Flitwick and Hagrid, and they soon invited Rosmerta to join them. Curious, Harry crept closer to listen in on the conversation which was initially about how the Dementors were negatively affecting the local economy before veering off into lurid discussions about the Azkaban escape and the many supposed sins of "the traitor Sirius Black," who Fudge seemed to think was by far the most dangerous of the escapees.

*"Obviously, Black was tired of his double-agent role," the Minister said. "He was ready to declare his support openly for You-Know-Who, and he seems to have planned to become the Potters' Secret Keeper just to help bring about their deaths. But as we all know, You-Know-Who met his downfall in little Jim Potter. Powers gone, horribly*

*weakened, he fled. And this left Black in a very nasty position indeed. His master fallen at the very moment when he, Black, had shown his true colors as a traitor. He had no choice but to run for it."* [AN 2]

Harry rolled his invisible eyes, annoyed at the Minister's credulity. Of course, in Fudge's defense, Sirius Black had obligingly given a very thorough confession at his trial. The boy frowned. He'd read over the trial transcript several times, and they certainly seemed convincing to him. But there was still *something* there. Something he was missing. Harry shook his head. It would come to him, he was sure of it. Across the room, Moody had just collected his late lunch and was heading back up the stairs to his room.

*"But what do you think Black and the other escaped Death Eaters have broken out to do?" said Madam Rosmerta.*

*"Good gracious, Minister, they aren't trying to rejoin You-Know-Who, are they?"*

*"I dare say that is the eventual plan," said Fudge evasively.*

*"But we hope to catch Black and the others long before that. I must say, You-Know-Who alone and friendless is one thing ... but give him back his most devoted servants, and I shudder to think how quickly he'll rise again ...." [AN 2]*

Having heard enough, Harry made his way to the loo, his thoughts turning rapidly. While he appreciated the memories and insights that Alastor Moody was providing, the boy suddenly wanted to return to his room and study the Black trial transcript once more in hopes that the answers would reveal themselves. When those revelations finally came later that evening, even Harry would be surprised by their source.

## ***The Longbottom Dungeons***

### ***3:30 p.m.***

“How can we get him out of there?” Lucius Malfoy asked with a deceptive calm that only barely masked his mounting alarm.

“We can’t do anything of the sort, Lucius,” Regulus said with resignation, though he was quite alarmed himself. “Only Severus can safely end the Legilimency intrusion. If we do anything to disturb him at this point, who knows how disastrous the consequences might be.”

By this point, Severus Snape had spent hours staring placidly into the eyes of the paralyzed Bellatrix Lestrangle. The length of time spent on this venture was not the source of their concern, for the interrogations of Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrangle had each lasted about as long. However, neither of those two interrogations had resulted in *physical damage* to the man.

Regulus had been the first to notice the small red scratch that spontaneously appeared on Snape’s left hand. A few moments later, another scratch appeared on his right cheek – and a second later, his head jerked about as if he’d been struck repeatedly before shifting back to meet Bellatrix’s helpless gaze as if nothing had happened. But while there was no visible source of the blows to the Legilimens’ head, their aftereffects were obvious. Within a few seconds, Snape had a black eye, and his nose had seemingly broken itself with an audible crack.

Concerned that Snape’s real-world injuries might also compromise his safety within Bellatrix’s mind, Reg cautiously applied some basic healing Charms that he



thought (hoped!) would not cause a distraction to the man's psychic avatar.

"Did you know that Legilimency could do this?" he asked in a quiet voice.

"No," Lucius answered curtly. "And I fear, neither did Severus."

### ***Inside the mind of Bellatrix Lestrange***

Severus snarled angrily as another thorn clipped his ear, and in response, he suffered another sudden and painful flashback. It was Autumn Term of his Second Year, and a group of Fourth Year Slytherins had mastered the Stinging Hex and thought it might be amusing to practice it on the greasy impoverished Half-blood who wore rags under his robes and was friends with a particularly uppity Mudblood. Of course, it had only taken him two hours over a potion cauldron followed by discreet access to their dorm room to disabuse them of the idea that they should ever use Severus Snape for such sport again. Indeed, he'd heard that one of them still had problems with persistent bed-wetting to this very day.

Unfortunately, the fact that he'd swiftly avenged himself for that unpleasant afternoon of Slytherin hazing did not eliminate the *painful memories* of it, memories the psychic thorns could reawaken with just a scratch. He suddenly felt oddly grateful that those wretched Marauders, while cruel in their humor, generally preferred embarrassing jinxes over curses that could draw blood or break bone. At the time, he'd considered public embarrassment at the hands of Potter and Black to be worse than all but the bloodiest of curses, but in his current environment, the memory of being debugged in the Hogwarts courtyard in front of

dozens of jeering classmates was far less dangerous than his recollections of being challenged by aspiring Death Eaters from his own house. And that wasn't even the worst problem – the memory attacks seemed to progress through Snape's life in chronological order, and at the rate of progression, it would not be long before he was experiencing flashbacks to Death Eater combat training and, worse, exposure to the Dark Lord's Cruciatus Curse. And if Snape was forced to sense-memory a Crucio or two (or ten!) while trapped inside Bellatrix's mind, it could be disastrous if not fatal. (*"Always assuming a flashback to That Night in the Shrieking Shack doesn't do me in first,"* he thought ruefully.) But given how narrow the path through the maze was relative to his size, further injuries seemed inevitable.

Snape furrowed his brow in thought. Presently, he had no power to affect the psychic integrity of the maze and very little power to protect himself against the maze. But he *could* make changes to his own psychic avatar so long as they could fit within the established rules of this mental landscape which, at the moment, was meant to emulate a naturalistic environment. Like most Hogwarts students, Severus had been duly impressed on his first day of Transfiguration when Minerva McGonagall demonstrated her Animagus form, so much so that he'd briefly investigated the process for acquiring such a form himself. He'd abandoned the inquiry after learning about the Conscription List, but he had not forgotten the results of that brief foray and the insights about his own nature that he'd gained.

There was a reason, after all, why he rarely took offense when the Marauders and his other school rivals sought to insult him by referring to him as *"The Dungeon Bat."*

Snape crouched and jumped forward, focusing his powerful mind on his own personal self-image as he did. Instantly, his robes flowed like black oil in the air before shrinking and thickening into small yet powerful wings, and with a soft shudder of magic, the form of Severus Snape fell away to be replaced by that of a black bat flying effortlessly through the maze and then up over its walls into the night-sky of Bellatrix Lestrange's mindscape.

As Snape ascended, he marveled briefly over the sensation of flying even if it was only imaginary. He'd always detested broom travel, but *this* was something different and far better. He also took a moment to thank his lucky stars that he'd come up with this stratagem – from the air, the hedge maze seemed to stretch for miles. Then, Snape was abruptly reminded once again that the hedge maze wasn't a maze at all when the green trees below him began to turn grey and merge together into a single thick canopy. Seconds later, the grey branches rather unexpectedly sprouted a surprisingly colorful foliage of orange, pink, lime green, and yellow. The brilliant color scheme confused Snape at first until the 'foliage' suddenly took to the air as if to swarm in his direction.

Mentally, Snape hissed in anger mixed with fear. What had appeared to be colorful foliage was actually a carefully fabricated memory of a flock of magical birds taking wing. Particularly, a rare species of magical bird indigenous to sub-Saharan Africa that bore the obnoxiously twee name of *Fwooper*. Fwoopers were well-known in the magical world for their brilliant and lovely multicolored plumage.

And also for the fact that extended exposure to their song caused permanent insanity.

In the dungeon cell, Regulus was wiping Snape's forehead with a damp cloth when the other man suddenly spoke for the first time since the interrogation began.

*"Fwoooooopers!"* he whispered harshly before resuming his silent focus on Bellatrix.

Regulus leaned back in surprise, opened his mouth, closed it again, and looked up at Lucius in confusion. Lucius simply shrugged.

"Well, I don't think *either* of us was expecting him to say *that*," he quipped.

Suddenly, there was a soft pop as Hoskins, the Longbottom's house elf appeared bearing a silver tray with more damp towels.

"Your fresh towels, sir. Also, Hoskins regrets to inform youses gentle-wizards, but there has been an unsuspected arrival."

Reg and Lucius looked at one another sharply. "Who?" Lucius asked.

"Tis Mr. Regulus Black's brother, sir. The one what was staying upstairs during the summer and leaving dog hairs all over the place." Hoskins then coughed in embarrassment. "Not that Hoskins minded cleaning up after the visiting dog-man, of course. No, not at all."

Regulus closed his eyes. "I'll kill him. I'll cut off all that long hair he's so proud of and strangle him with it."

"Let's set your unrequited fantasies aside for now," drawled Lucius. "Hoskins, would you be so good as to ... distract Sirius Black so that he does not come down here?"

“But of course, sirs. Hoskins will be subtle and polite but also firm and resolute.” The house elf bowed respectfully and then popped away.

Regulus shook his head in annoyance and went back to wiping the forehead of Severus Snape, who had just begun twitching his left eye somewhat frantically. “Come on, Severus. Get *out* of there!”

### ***Moments later in the Longbottom Parlor***

By this point, Sirius Black had spent more than half an hour stuck in the Longbottom Parlor. Though “parlor” was perhaps a poor term for the chamber which was in no sense a feminine room. Indeed, the parlor was home to a surprising number of stuffed animal heads hanging on the walls. As Sirius surveyed the room, he was suddenly reminded that Augusta Longbottom had once held a reputation for game hunting (both magical and muggle). There had been a story from his school days that she’d even fashioned a hat out of a stuffed vulture, but he was sure that was all nonsense. Well, pretty sure.

He’d just checked the door for the fifth time to make sure it was still locked (and resistant to Alohomoras) when Hoskins popped back into the room, causing Sirius to utter a startled “*Eek!*” Next to the diminutive creature stood a rolling cart with a large covered tray on it.

“Hoskins does beg your esteemed pardon, Good Lord Black, sir. But Lord Black’s younger brother wishes Hoskins to convey that he will be along to see you momentarily except that he is in what he describes as *a delicate juncture* at this time. In the meantime, Hoskins hopes that Lord Black will indulge in a brief repast while he waits.”

With a flourish, Hoskins pulled the lid off the tray to reveal a full English tea service with a large plate of watercress sandwiches and an even larger plate of sugar cookies.

“Well ... um, thanks, er, Hoskins,” Sirius answered somewhat lamely. “But if it’s all the same, I’d like to go join my brother. I promise I won’t do anything to disrupt Reg’s ... delicate juncture.”

Hoskins blinked twice with his big eyes which immediately started to water even as his smile faded and his lips began to quiver.

“Hoskins’s afternoon repast is not pleasing to the Great and Noble Lord Black? Hoskins is ... a bad elf?!?” Then, Hoskins began to weep openly and then wail rather loudly. “Hoskins IS a bad elf! Hoskins shall go now and bang his fingers in the oven door until his knuckles crack. *Bad Hoskins! Bad Hoskins!*”

Alarmed, Sirius rushed forward to console the heartbroken elf. “No, Hoskins, no! Your ... repast looks delicious! Here, I think I will have some tea and a bite to eat while I wait.” He crammed a whole sandwich into his mouth and then smiled at the elf.

“*Mmm! Tasty!*” he tried to say through a full mouth as crumbs blew everywhere.

“Oh, Hoskins is so pleased! So very, very, very pleased indeed! Lord Black’s kindness has given Hoskins reason to CARRY ON LIVING! Hoskins will step out now and allow the Great and Wonderful Lord Black to enjoy his meal! If Lord Black needs Hoskins for anything else, please to be tugging on the cord next to the fireplace!”

With that, the house elf popped out, leaving a bemused Sirius behind to sit down to a plate of sandwiches and enjoy some tea. Anything to keep that poor deluded creature from offing itself like one of the old Black elves would have done in his youth.

Outside the room, Hoskins materialized and positioned himself to monitor the parlor and its occupant.

*“Hoskins must make a note to thank Dobby when Hoskins next sees him,” Hoskins thought to himself. “Apparently, there can be a time for histrionic behavior after all.”*

### ***Meanwhile in someone else’s memories ...***

The Battle of Tutshill Green took place on 20 October 1979 when Death Eaters attacked a Quidditch match between the Tutshill Tornados and Puddlemere United. Their apparent intentions were, in likely order of importance, (a) to assassinate Millicent Bagnold, who had recently been elected Minister of Magic on an aggressive anti-Voldemort campaign; (b) to assassinate Puddlemere United’s star Seeker, Will Stockton, who was also the most prominent Muggleborn Quidditch player in the country; and (c) to instill general panic. Thankfully, the attack was only successful in the last goal. While the Death Eaters were prepared with a sneak attack that could take out Minister Bagnold’s bodyguards, they reckoned without the presence of James Potter and Sirius Black, both of whom were in attendance as spectators on a rare day off. When the Death Eaters apparated right onto the pitch (in a shocking breach of the stadium’s Anti-Apparition wards), Potter and Black both jumped right out of the stands and into the thick of things.

The fact that the two off-duty Auror-trainees had somehow managed to smuggle illegal second wands into the Tutshill Stadium despite it being a “Wand Free Zone” for the duration of the championship match would later be quietly swept under the rug.

Sirius focused his attention on Voldemort’s personal assassin, a female Death Eater known as Miss Demeanor and recognizable by her featureless ivory mask (which was somehow more frightening for its plainness than the garish faces carved on the other Death Eater’s masks). Meanwhile, James, in an incredible display of Transfiguration, somehow managed to selectively turn the ground under the Death Eaters into man-sized tar pits without affecting the rest of the pitch. Instantly, most of the Death Eaters found themselves up to their shoulders in tar and unable to move. The sight would have been comical had Miss Demeanor not demonstrated her own puissance by blasting herself into the air with an overpowered Ventus in the split second before the ground beneath her could be transfigured, and then cartwheeling gracefully in the air to land on solid ground before renewing her attack, now on both Sirius *and* James.

Her speed was incredible, and as Harry watched, he could tell that Miss Demeanor – who Moody helpfully identified as Azkaban escapee Bellatrix Lestrange – had both professional dueling experience and at least some degree of Auror training, but not even that could explain her incredible speed, her precision, and (ironically, Harry thought), her *demeanor*. From what he’d been told by Reg and Lucius about the woman locked up in the Longbottom dungeon, she was completely insane and prone to giggling rants, high-pitched shrieking, and the recitation of morbid nursery rhymes and children’s songs. *This* incarnation of



Bellatrix, however, said nothing at all except the occasional incantation, with even most of her spells cast wordlessly.

And as Harry studied the woman more closely, he was further surprised by the total absence of any emotional information that he could pick up from her through his Legilimency. Granted, she was wearing a mask, but so were the other Death Eaters, and Harry had no problem detecting their emotional states. In particular, the woman was certainly aware that she was fighting her cousin, Sirius Black, (as well as James Potter, a more distant cousin), but she gave absolutely no hint of familiarity with either man. To Miss Demeanor, they were simply obstacles between her and her mission.

The battle between the three was truly impressive, but even the deadly Miss Demeanor was no match for Potter and Black together, especially with more Aurors on the way. With a low growl (the only hint of emotion she'd shown), Miss Demeanor looked up above her opponents to the stands where Minister Bagnold was being quickly ushered to safety by her security detail. Her wand flashed as she cried out two words: ***BOMBARDA MAXIMA!***

Desperately, James leaped as far as he could towards the path of the spell, and then he stabbed his wand into the ground. The whole pitch shook violently as a massive stone Keeper's mitt easily thirty-feet-tall thrust itself up out of the earth to *catch Bellatrix's spell!* The mitt exploded from the force of the Bombarda, but it absorbed the entire blast in the process and no one else was harmed. Miss Demeanor was so shocked that, for a brief second, she forgot her surroundings, and that was enough for Sirius to strike her with a Cutting Curse. She screamed as she went down, blood spurting from her side.

*“Enough.”*

The word was not spoken above a conversational tone, but everyone in the stadium heard it somehow. And everyone's attention was instantly drawn to the robe-clad figure who had not been there a second earlier. There were perhaps three quick seconds of total silence that fell over the stadium as the hundreds of attendees realized who had just arrived. It was the one man they feared above all others, so much so that not one of them dared to speak his name aloud. Then, the Dark Lord Voldemort pointed his wand at the sky - “**MORSMORDRE**” - and the Dark Mark appeared over the Tutshill stadium. And the screaming started anew.

On the far side of the pitch, one of the Aurors tried to target Voldemort with the Killing Curse but only got out the first word before being struck down by the Dark Lord's much quicker application of it. The other Aurors focused on him, but Voldemort just sneered.

“Kindly wait your turn,” he drawled while performing a complicated wand movement. Instantly, Sirius Black and the Aurors around him all dropped to their knees, suddenly overcome with crippling nausea and vertigo. Sirius and a few others got some spells off, but they all went wide. A few couldn't even try as they were too busy vomiting all over the pitch.

Still on one knee, James took advantage of that instant of distraction to transfigure the pitch once more. Only instead of tar, the ground under Voldemort turned into a pit of the strongest acid he knew how to make. But to his shock, Voldemort didn't fall into the pit. He simply floated above it and then glided to safety while addressing James.

“This marks the second time you have defied me, James Potter. There will not be a third. **AVADA KEDAVRA!**”

Summoning up his strength, James stabbed the earth once more with his wand, and with a loud *clang*, a thick column of iron shot up out of the ground to take the spell for him, exploding immediately upon impact by the spell. Voldemort snarled and fired off a second Killing Curse, and James responded by taking a step back and summoning another iron barrier that exploded like the first one but also kept James alive for another moment. But it was obvious his strength was flagging, and Harry knew all too well how exhausting it would be to transfigure so many large and durable objects one after another. James summoned a third protective barrier and then a fourth.

But when he summoned a fifth (even though he staggered in the process), James finally got lucky. Before Voldemort could destroy his cover again, he was momentarily distracted when one of the Aurors who’d been nearly incapacitated by his Vertigo Curse nevertheless got off a lucky shot with a Lacero that sliced off a piece of Voldemort’s robe. Incensed, Voldemort lashed out at the Auror and killed him instantly, but through his death, James Potter finally got his shot. He stepped forward and touched his wand to his last iron barrier. Instantly, hundreds of tiny cracks appeared in its surface, and the barrier collapsed into innumerable iron fragments suspended in mid-air. And then each of those fragments sharpened themselves into pointed projectiles that immediately shot towards Voldemort at tremendous speed.

Years earlier, while cleaning the living room at the Dursleys, Harry had happened to catch part of a military program that Vernon was watching. Specifically, one that discussed and demonstrated the effectiveness of a Muggle weapon

called a *Browning machine gun*. The resemblance between the effects of that weapon and the transfiguration effect James used were striking. In a flash, Voldemort had thrown up a *Protego Maxima*, but even he struggled against the hail of transfigured bullets James had sent his way. That might well have been the end of Voldemort had he not done something James could never have expected – just as his shielding spell was about to collapse, Voldemort crouched ... and then *rocketed up* into the air to hover a good 75 feet above the ground. James dropped to his knees in exhaustion and shock. Harry was shocked as well, and Moody paused the memory.

“I ... was under the impression that self-propelled magical flight was impossible,” Harry said. “How is he doing that?”

Moody shrugged. “No idea. Albus never figured it out either. Nor have the Unspeakables, assuming they’d tell us if they had.” He resumed the memory.

“You see now one sample of my true power, James Potter,” Voldemort called out. “Witness another before you die!  
***FIENDFYRE!***”

Immediately, there was utter (and perhaps literal) pandemonium, as the same portal to *somewhere else* appeared that Harry had seen the previous February when Lockhart/Regulus cast this spell in the DADA classroom. But instead of summoning a barrier to stop Aurors from pursuit, Voldemort had summoned the hellfire for offensive purposes. This time, the portal to *somewhere else* appeared at the tip of Voldemort’s wand, and with a cruel laugh, he blew on the hellfire as if he were trying to start up a campfire. The flames expanded rapidly and then shaped themselves into the form of a gargantuan snake that coiled around him. Harry’s mouth hung open. Stretched out, he

was certain the snake would be close to a hundred yards long, much bigger than the Basilisk. And then, it reared up as if to strike and plunged its head towards James Potter.

Utterly exhausted by his transfiguration efforts, James had nothing left to give and simply closed his eyes and waited to die. And he would have had a great geyser of water not burst forth from the ground between him and the snake. The water shot up towards the hellfire snake and then wrapped around it as if to intertwine with it. Then, the water itself began to sparkle brightly, and in response, the snake began to thrash about in agony before breaking apart and fading away into nothingness. Moody briefly paused the memory to explain that the water sparkled because it had been transfigured into *aqua veritas*, an ultra-pure magical form of water that could only be created through Alchemy and which was one of the few substances known to be capable of dousing Fiendfyre. Its sudden appearance made the identity of James's savior obvious.

"Dumbledore!" hissed Voldemort angrily at the sight of the old wizard who now stood between him and Potter, the phoenix Fawkes perched on his shoulder. If the man had encountered any difficulties in bypassing the wards of the Dark Mark, he certainly didn't show them.

"Why yes, Lord Voldemort," Dumbledore said brightly. "I'm so pleased you remember my name." He tilted his head inquisitively. "I don't suppose I can persuade you to simply surrender, can I? This will be our third encounter, and the last two times, you were forced to make an expeditious retreat. Aren't you afraid your luck will run out?"

The dark wizard sneered. "Not luck, old man. *Skill*. Or perhaps you would like to join me up here in the sky so that we could converse as *equals*?"

Dumbledore chortled. "Oh yes, I see that you've mastered the art of self-powered flight. Quite extraordinary. Though one wonders what sort of sacrifices you've had to make to acquire such a gift. Personally, I prefer more traditional and elegant forms of magic."

"Such as?" Voldemort drawled, though Harry thought he detected a hint of concern in his voice.

Dumbledore swiftly raised his left hand into the air while casually holding his wand in his right. To Harry's surprise, he was holding up what appeared to be a deck of Muggle playing cards! Dumbledore smiled broadly at his enemy.

"Pick a card, Voldemort. Any card!" Then, he brought his wand up and touched it to the deck which instantly exploded out of his hands as if he were playing a game of 52-Pickup. But the cards didn't fall to the ground. Instead, they flew up into the sky towards Voldemort at great speed, with each card spinning wildly as it went. Instantly, Voldemort had a Protego shield in place, but to his shock, the shield didn't simply repel the cards. Rather, upon impact, each individual card continued to spin in place, giving off sparks as if each was a tiny buzz-saw intent on cutting through the shield. According to Moody, Dumbledore had enchanted each card to be nearly indestructible and razor-sharp. Even worse for Voldemort, the cards could *track him* in the sky, and those cards that couldn't get at his shield directly spun off in their flight and tried to get *around* it, forcing him to convert the shield into a Protego orb. But despite his best efforts, his shields were beginning to visibly crack under the sheer number of spinning cards attacking him.

Furious, Voldemort flung his arms out, causing his shield to explode outward and briefly dispel the card-swarm. They

quickly regrouped, however, and Voldemort was forced to take evasive actions. The Dark Lord tried wind, fire, and lightning-based curses, but while each attack would whittle away some of the cards, there were still too many in pursuit. Finally, in a fury, Voldemort gave a command to his Death Eaters through the Sonorous Charm, and both he and they apparated away. While there were casualties (many of whom were people trampled in the panic when Voldemort summoned Fiendfyre), there were only two fatalities on this day – the day Albus Dumbledore was declared the only wizard Voldemort feared.

### ***The Forest of Bellatrix Lestranger's Mind***

Desperately, the black bat that was Severus Snape twisted and twirled through the mass of Fwoopers as they sang their maddening song. It could not have been a coincidence, Snape thought, that this particular psychic trap suddenly sprang into existence when he flew over the maze as a bat. In his normal form, he could have used Occlumency to block out the wretched bird-song at least to some extent. But as a bat, echolocation was too fundamental to his self-image; he simply did not have the option of not listening to any part of his environment. Finally, Snape saw what he was looking for: an opening through the multicolored flock and, below it, a gap in the branches of the forest below. Snape gave one last powerful flap of his wings before tucking them in and dive-bombing straight down. The Fwoopers scattered for a moment before turning as one to follow him down.

Barely thirty feet above the forest floor, Snape extended his wings to slow his descent and then transformed himself back into his human form in time to drop to the ground in a roll. The mad chittering of the Fwoopers coming behind him showed that the danger was not over yet, but in his human

form, it was a danger he was better able to address. From a crouched position on the ground, Snape pulled out his wand and aimed at the flock. With a single word from him, an enormous gout of flame burst forth from his wand tip to immolate the angry birds, as well as a decent-sized patch of the trees around them.

Once the hideous sounds of the accursed birds had faded to nothing, Snape slowly rose and surveyed his surroundings. He was out of the maze and past the birds, but he was now on a lonely barren path through a sinister twisted forest. The Legilimens was quite certain that Bellatrix's mental defenses were already actively adapting to his countermeasures, and he wondered what new adaptations and surprises were in store.

His curiosity was answered when a black arrow slammed into his collarbone hard enough to break it.

In the dungeon cell, Regulus and Lucius were relieved that Snape finally seemed to grow calmer ... right up until his whole body jerked and a large spurt of blood shot out of his shoulder.

"MERLIN'S BALLS!" Regulus exclaimed as Lucius watched in horror. Reg was the first to recover, and he vanished Snape's coat and shirt before casting a diagnostic charm. There was a jagged hole in the man's shoulder that was still leaking blood at an alarming rate.

"Well?" Lucius asked impatiently. "How is this possible?"

Regulus looked grim. "I don't know how it's possible, Lucius, but according to my charm, Severus seems to have been shot by an arrow that missed his heart by less than six inches!"



Severus recovered from the injury just barely in time to block a second arrow with a Protego shield. By then, he was able to see where the arrows had come from, and his blood ran cold. Standing on a nearby tree branch, he could now see a female figure in night-black robes and wearing a Death Eater mask. Specifically, the distinctive featureless mask worn by Miss Demeanor when she was killing on the orders of their Lord. Snape strengthened his shield while also reaching up to yank the arrow out of his shoulder with a painful gasp. Miss Demeanor sent a few more arrows his way, but he was able to deflect them easily even as he healed the damage to his shoulder magically. Then, his eyes narrowed in suspicion – from what he knew of the woman, it was unlike Miss Demeanor to not press her advantage. Snape extended his Legilimency senses in all directions, and a soft high-pitched giggle from behind him gave just enough warning. He leaped to one side to dodge the arrow that would otherwise have struck the back of his head.

Rolling to safety, Snape stood with his back to a tree and set up another Protego. His worst fears were confirmed when a second figure stepped out of the brush: an unmasked Bellatrix Lestrange, attired in filthy Azkaban rags instead of the immaculate black Death Eater robes worn by her other self but still armed with an identical bow. Snape grimaced as he considered his suddenly dire situation. He was now facing *two* separate incarnations of the same person, Bellatrix Lestrange at two different points in her mental existence. Which also meant he was now facing *two* of the best duelists to have ever taken the Dark Mark.

Even as Snape tried to keep an eye on both women, Miss Demeanor obliged by leaping down from her tree branch. As she did, her bow seemed to turn to black smoke before reforming into the shape of a wand which she wasted no time in turning against him with a barrage of deadly spells.

Meanwhile, Bellatrix's bow also transformed into a wand (the *same* wand, apparently, as that used by her other self). Comparing the two side-by-side would have been fascinating to Snape had the situation not become so dangerous. Miss Demeanor was every bit as focused and efficient as her reputation would have indicted. Bellatrix, on the other hand, was in a frenzy of motion and emotion, flinging curses wildly even as she cackled and gibbered.

Suddenly, Snape realized what must have happened. The Miss Demeanor persona was one constructed by Rookwood's foul perversion of Occlumency that was used to shape the original Bellatrix Black's personality into one focused only on killing in the name of the Dark Lord. But being a completely artificial persona, it was incapable of standing up to the trauma of Azkaban. And so, it receded and allowed the shattered remnants of Bellatrix's true personality to bear the brunt of the Dementors. The result? Dissociation – the consequence of two Occlumency-based personalities, neither of which could agree on which was real. The very same risk of running parallel identities that he had warned Harry Potter of not so long ago.

"It seems you have me at a disadvantage, ladies," he drawled with far more confidence than he felt. "Two against one hardly seems fair." Then, he turned to sneer at Bellatrix. "Even if one is only a shattered husk who can at best serve as a distraction for her better half."

"SHATTERED HUSK?!? BETTER HALF?!?" Bellatrix shrieked. "I'LL SHOW YOU WHO THE BETTER HALF IS!!!"

With that, the maddened woman let loose with a flurry of cutting spells. Instantly, Snape abandoned his Protego and jumped out of the way of Miss Demeanor's attacks and *into* Bellatrix's spells ... which he neatly parried straight

towards Miss Demeanor with his Averno shield. She was caught by surprise, and a few of those hexes managed to strike the assassin, causing her to cry out to Bellatrix in anger.

"Be careful, *you fool!* He's trying to bait us into turning against one another!"

"FOOL?!? YOU CALL ME A FOOL?!? I AM THE GREATEST, MOST BELOVED OF OUR MASTER'S DEATH EATERS!!!"

As Snape had hoped, the enraged and insane woman turned her fury on her own other self, and as Bellatrix and Miss Demeanor began to swap curses, Snape ran off into the woods in the hope that he could circle around them before they realized his stratagem.

*"If both of Bellatrix's personae are here together," he thought to himself, "they must be guarding something. Which means I'm actually drawing close to Bellatrix's memory palace!"*

He ran for several seconds through the underbrush as the sound of spellfire echoed through the forest. And then, the spellfire abruptly stopped.

*"Wonderful," he thought bitterly. "Best case scenario: Bellatrix has destroyed or incapacitated Miss Demeanor, which means I'm one-on-one with the crazier but less dangerous personality. Worst case scenario: Bellatrix finally realized that I'm the true enemy, and they're both coming for me. And since they will have adapted to my strategy of pitting them against one another, I have little chance against both Bellatrixes (Bellatrices?) together."*

As Snape made his way swiftly through the forest, he considered his options. The fact that two iterations of

Bellatrix Lestrange could act independently against him was not a strategy he could employ himself. While he was certainly capable of generating secondary personalities, they would not have enough definition to act as useful allies in this psychic environment. Even if he could cause, say, Mr. X or Hubert Turnipseed to materialize, he would still have to direct their actions, thus halving his own combat readiness rather than doubling it.

Then, Snape froze as an idea popped into his head. It was a reckless, dangerous idea, but it was one he would at least need to consider if he hoped to survive this experience. Many, many years before, when he'd only begun to explore the deeper mysteries of Occlumency, he'd come across an obscure technique – *Advocatus Diaboli*. Not nearly as sinister as its name implied, the technique allowed him to manifest a true secondary personality, one that was neither based on his own nor created from scratch. Rather, the *Advocatus* was derived from Snape's understanding of the personality of another real-life person, someone who Snape knew well and whose opinions he valued, but whose views and values were different enough from his own that the *Advocatus* could give impartial advice and opinion on everything from reviewing homework assignments to major life decisions. He'd been quite proud to develop his own *Advocatus* by the age of fourteen ... and disappointed when circumstances had forced him to lock it away forever in the deepest confines of his own memory palace.

It was not helpful at all to have an *Advocatus Diaboli* who had come to despise you.

Then, just up ahead, Severus saw an opening in the forest that led to what appeared to be a cave entrance. He rushed forward only to be blasted into the air by a Bombarda from

somewhere behind. He landed in a heap and felt a sharp pain as his leg broke from the impact.

(While the pain was excruciating, Snape might well have found some amusement in the panicked and horrified reactions of Regulus and Lucius when his physical leg spontaneously snapped at an odd angle.)

Shaking off the impact, Snape quickly focused his Occlumency to neutralize his capacity to feel pain. *“Useful technique, that,”* he thought through a growing delirium. *“I must remember to teach it to Sensible Potter. Assuming I survive, that is.”*

Focusing past the pain, he sent a return Blasting Curse of his own back towards his pursuers, but Miss Demeanor was able to casually dodge his attack with inhuman grace. Then, off to his side, Snape was distracted by the sound of trees being pulled up from their roots, and seconds later, Bellatrix emerged from the woods atop an enormous oak that she’d transfigured into a humanoid shape and animated before riding it into battle as if it were an Ent from that old Muggle book that Lily had once forced him to read. From the opposite side of the clearing, Miss Demeanor leaped from tree to tree as she moved into position for the kill.

Snape closed his eyes and focused on his last resort. He reached deep inside his own psyche and unlocked a long-hidden door that he’d barricaded shut sometime around the age of sixteen. Bellatrix and her Ent advanced towards him menacingly when suddenly there was another explosion, this time at the midsection of the Ent. It shuddered violently, and Bellatrix was flung from it down to the ground. A second explosion blasted out one of its legs and a third spell caused the whole tree to catch fire. Immediately,

the mighty oak started to fall ... right towards the stunned and prone Bellatrix. At the last possible second, she apparated away just before the great flaming mass would have crushed her.

Meanwhile, Miss Demeanor looked around wildly in search of the new intruder. Taking advantage of her distraction, Snape fired off several vicious curses towards the assassin. Most she was able to dodge or parry, but a few got through. Her situation grew worse when more spells came at her at a flanking direction from deeper in the forest. Outnumbered and unable to defend against both attackers, Miss Demeanor followed the lead of her other self and apparated away.

The immediate threat over, Snape took the opportunity to heal his leg while he waited for his “savior” to approach. Seconds later, the Advocatus Diabolis emerged from the forest, her red hair flashing like fire itself in the reflected glow of the still-burning tree. And as she drew near, her eyes flashed the green of the Killing Curse. Snape closed his eyes in resignation.

*“Wonderful,” he thought. “Twenty seconds in, and she’s already angry with me.”*

“It’s been quite a long time, *Snivellus*,” said Lily Evans with a cold sneer. “Mind telling me what you’ve dragged me into now?”

## Chapter End Notes

Next: Snape continues his journey through the mind of Bellatrix Lestrange, but the arrival of a decidedly unhappy Lily Evans only brings new horrors.

Meanwhile, Moody shows Harry one more memory than he’d planned, and later, Harry encounters a nightmare

of a different sort.

AN 1: Tentative update schedule (obviously the holidays are screwing with everything).

Dec 19, 2018 – DEM Ch 26 update on ff(dot)net and AO3

Dec 27, 2018 – Strangers In Boston on TSM's website for Patrons

Jan 2, 2019 – DEM Ch 27 draft on TSM's website for Discord followers

Jan 5, 2019 – DEM Ch 27 on ff(dot)net and AO3

AN 2: Italicized passages are from Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, Ch 10. As per usual, I only directly quote JKR when it's POS plot relevant.

AN 3: Special shout-out to the good folks at the POS-Editorial chat on The Sinister Man's Discord Page: patronus, darkphoenix31, FeatheryMinx, CuredentTepes, and, of course, the indefatigable Ozzie. Check out the Discord Page yourself if you wish to get advance peeks at upcoming chapters, discuss your POS theories, or find out about (and hopefully support) The Sinister Man's original fiction.

AN 4: Milestones! We have broken 11k Followers! And we have over 900 members on The Sinister Man's Discord page!

# **Dreamscapes, Memories, and Nightmares (pt 3)**

## Chapter Notes

Possible Trigger Warning: An unexpected and very violent death. Sort of. And a fairly horrific Neil Gaiman reference.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### ***HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATH EATER MENACE***

***Harry Potter and all associate characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.***

### ***CHAPTER 27: Dreamscapes, Memories, and Nightmares (pt 3)***

**Possible Trigger Warning : This chapter has perhaps the darkest scene I've written since Ron had to vomit up all those spiders. There will be an unexpected and very violent death. Sort of. Along a fairly horrific Neil Gaiman reference.**

*The immediate threat over, Snape took the opportunity to heal his leg while he waited for his "savior" to approach. Seconds later, the Advocatus Diaboli emerged from the forest, her red hair flashing like fire itself in the reflected glow of the still-burning tree. And as she drew near, her eyes flashed the green of the Killing Curse. Snape closed his eyes in resignation.*



*"Wonderful," he thought. "Twenty seconds in, and she's already angry with me."*

*"It's been quite a long time, Snivellus," said Lily Evans with a cold sneer. "Mind telling me what you've dragged me into now?"*

Despite her apparent anger, this manifestation of Lily was not without mercy, as shown when she reached out a hand to help Snape to his feet. He regarded her cautiously. Superficially, she appeared as she did on the day when he'd ruined everything by calling her a Mudblood in front of Potter and his stooges. It was only a few months later, after he'd decided that their friendship was irretrievably broken, that he'd locked his Advocatus away deep in his subconscious. But despite her youth, this Lily's eyes sparkled with an incisive intelligence that was more perceptive and far more calculating than would have been possible for her 16-year-old Gryffindor self. In other words, this was a Lily who could have gone to Slytherin.

"I imagine you know exactly what you've been dragged into. After all, you know everything I know about our situation, albeit filtered through the lens of Lily's personality. Or as best I could recreate her personality within my own mind."

"I doubt I know *everything* you know, Snape. You forget how much you *love* to talk and show off how clever you are. I imagine I'll be denied some information here and there just so that you can smugly deliver plot exposition like a detective in a Muggle mystery novel." She smirked at him with a measure of contempt. "I know the basics, of course. Having consistently made bad decisions for the first thirty-four years of your life, you have finally decided to do what's right but only in the most over-complicated, wrongheaded way possible. I mean, we wouldn't be having this

conversation in a forest that represents the twisted psyche of a Death Eater with multiple personalities if you'd just had the sense to tell Dumbledore about the Horcruxes, now would we?"

"Perhaps not," he conceded, "but in that case, you would not be here to experience the limited form of existence my Occlumency allows you."

Her eyes narrowed. "Cut the crap, Snape. I'm here because you need me. Having a fully independent secondary personality is the only way you'll have a chance against two independently functioning copies of Bellatrix. And quite frankly, considering our shared history, I was perfectly happy with a state of quiescent nonexistence. It was certainly preferable to being here with *you*."

"Enough, Lily," he snapped. "You know what's at stake. We must find a way to penetrate Bellatrix's memory palace and find out where she hid the Horcrux that the Dark Lord assigned to her. And we must do so together if we're to have any chance to succeed."

"Evans," she answered coldly. "You can't be on a first name basis with Mudbloods, Snape. Mulciber and Rosier wouldn't approve."

A flash of anguish passed over Snape's face before it returned to its normal emotionless mask. "So be it. Though I am curious as to why you wish to be known as Evans instead of Potter."

She snorted. "Because your brain would explode in anger if you were forced to refer to your *Advocatus* by that name. But that's all in my future, anyway. You have no idea why I ended up with Potter, so naturally I don't either. Perhaps *he* finally grew up."

"I somehow doubt that was the reason, Li - ... Evans."

"Whatever, Snape. Let's just get this over with," she said as strode off confidently towards the cave entrance Severus had spotted. "Meanwhile, I'll enjoy the satisfaction of knowing that after all these years, you finally realized I was *right* about all those Junior Death Eaters whose approval mattered more to you than my friendship."

"Can we *not* do this now?" Snape said through gritted teeth as he followed. "We are deep within the fractured psyche of Bellatrix Lestrange and about to enter her memory palace where things will only grow more dangerous. I'm sure her Occlumency defenses are already adapting to your presence and developing new strategies to destroy us. It is *not helpful* for you to obsess over your anger towards me, and certainly not helpful for you to act like ...." He bit off the end of that sentence before finishing it, but Lily noticed.

"Like a Mudblood?" she asked angrily.

He grimaced. "I was going to say like an absolute bitch. Is that better or worse?"

Lily glared at him before suddenly bursting into laughter. "Oh honestly, Snape! I can't believe I need to remind you of such an important detail that I'm sure you already know but seem to have completely forgotten!"

"What?" he asked, angry at the implied insult to his cunning and memory. "What have I forgotten that's so important?"

She stepped towards him and looked at his face with surprising fondness given her previous hostility.

"*That I am not Lily Evans, you dunderhead!* I'm your Advocatus Diaboli which you chose to base on your

understanding of Lily's character! And so, if I'm acting like '*a bitch*,' it means two things. First, '*acting like a bitch*' is what you would expect the real Lily to do if she were here under these circumstances. And more importantly, I'm acting that way because subconsciously you think you *deserve* having Lily to treat you with such hostility. Now, would you *please* get over all your ridiculous feelings of guilt over all the things you did that you believe justify Lily's anger so we can get on with it?"

Severus growled at his Advocatus before stalking into the cave entrance with a still-amused Lily close behind. Two wordless Lumos spells let up the cavern once they were inside, and after about fifty feet of rough-hewn rock walls, both Severus and Lily were surprised when they transitioned into a corridor with smooth marble walls, floor, and ceiling. They were further surprised when they saw the first painting hung on the wall. Lily gasped. It was a moving portrait of Alice Longbottom writhing on a floor in agony. Next to the painting was a brass placard bearing an inscription.

*Alice Longbottom*  
November 1981  
Extreme Cruciatus Torture

While Lily stared at the image of her former friend suffering under magical torture, Severus moved past her towards a second painting just a few feet away. This one depicted Frank Longbottom in similar circumstances. Nearby was a third portrait bearing the name of some wizard Snape didn't know and depicting the pale corpse of someone slain by the Killing Curse. Beyond them, the corridor stretched on into the distance with scores of portraits lining both walls

"Her victims?" Lily asked.

Snape nodded. "But are they hung here as trophies? Or as reminders that she is past redemption? Either way, I fear we have a long walk ahead of us."

With that, he headed cautiously down the grisly corridor with Lily at his side.

"What did you mean *past redemption*?" she asked. Snape paused before answering.

"That ... is something I would not have expected Lily to understand. And so, you don't either. Every intentional murder damages the soul and degrades the murderer. But the Killing Curse does so in a more concrete manner. What most educated wizards know about the Killing Curse is that to meet its esoteric requirements, the caster must be able to visualize at least one person who he hates enough to kill. What is less widely known are the aftereffects."

"What? Death? I think most people have figured that much out."

Snape's lip curled at his former friend's flippancy. "I *meant* the aftereffects on the *caster*. Successfully casting the Killing Curse - or indeed, any of the Unforgivables - implants an *idea* into the caster's mind. One which cannot be fully dislodged save by the most delicate psychic surgery. And one which grows ever stronger with each successive Unforgiveable cast."

"What idea?" Lily asked somewhat fearfully.

"Those curses are called *Unforgivable* for a reason: They instill a personal conviction that the caster has done something for which he can never be forgiven. Something

which has rendered him *irredeemable*. I've always suspected that the reason the Dark Lord required his Death Eaters to make use of Unforgiveables as part of their initiation ceremonies and encouraged them to use the Unforgiveables freely when on raids was to inculcate that sense of hopeless irredeemability within his followers. To make them believe that after joining him, it simply would not be possible to ever truly rejoin civilized society and thus, that it was only among the Death Eaters that they could ever truly find companionship. In other words, past a certain point, someone like Bellatrix Lestrange would have accepted the fact that she was *utterly damned*. And being damned, there was nothing to stop her from committing even viler crimes because there could be no worse penalty to impose upon her."

Lily was silent for a long terrible moment before she spoke again.

"How many Unforgiveables did *you* cast as a Death Eater?" she finally asked in a quiet voice.

"Do you not know? You are a part of me, after all."

"No, I don't know. Perhaps that's something else you didn't want the real Lily to know either."

"Then I think it best that you retain your ignorance on that point, lest your opinion of me diminish even further."

They continued in silence for a moment before she spoke again.

"Do you think you're ... *irredeemable*?"

Snape snorted. "Your namesake certainly seemed to think so."

"Don't be so sure ... Severus."

He stopped and looked at her in surprise. "What do you mean?"

The Advocatus unexpectedly smiled at him. "There are things I don't know because you don't want to believe the real Lily could know them. But there are also things *I* know, or at least suspect, that *you* don't know because you won't allow yourself to consider them as possibilities."

"Such as?"

"Well, as you no doubt recall, Frank Longbottom deduced that you only called Lily a Mudblood to curry favor with Mulciber and Rosier because you were tired of being picked on as a blood traitor. But seriously, has it *never* occurred to you that Lily might have realized the same thing? That she didn't cut you off for good solely because she was offended at that word but rather because she finally realized how untenable and even dangerous your position in Slytherin House was so long as you two stayed friends?"

Snape stared at her. "Are you suggesting that the reason Lily cut all ties with me was ... a way of *protecting* me from my own housemates?"

"Well, honestly, Severus, I don't actually *know*, since I'm *not* Lily. I'm just saying that's a possible explanation for the way she treated you for your last two years at Hogwarts. After all, having her as a public enemy *really did* improve your standing greatly in Slytherin. In fact, it was only after you and she parted company that you were seriously targeted for recruitment into the Death Eaters. And now that we think about it, that's also *exactly* what she did with Harry, isn't it? Cut him out of the Potter family completely and for his own good because she thought that was the best way to

protect him? Come now, Sev. For all her virtues, you know one of Lily's least attractive features is her need to be a martyr for the cause."

Snape narrowed his eyes. "Even if that is ... a possibility, how is it that you have considered this theory but I never have?"

The Advocatus laughed. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe because at the end of the day, you've always been far too in love with your insecurity and bitterness to ever look past someone rejecting you and wonder why they did it! And consequently, the idea that Lily would hate you forever because of a single insult appealed to that Romantic-Gothic persona you've been crafting since you were out of short pants."

"I have not been crafting ...!"

"When you first met Lily, you literally appeared to her from inside the hollow of a tree. Like Ariel from *The Tempest* except that you were ghostly pale and wearing all-black old-fashioned clothes. Percy and Mary Shelley would have each written a novel about you if they'd been there to see it."

Severus snorted contemptuously but said nothing. The two continued on down the long corridor. Lost in his own thoughts, Snape was only barely aware of the graphic portraits depicting the dozens and dozens of Bellatrix's victims. He could afford the introspection; Lily was studying everything intently (as she always did), and so in time, he would remember everything she saw. Finally, after just passing just under a hundred paintings of torture and murder victims, the two at last came to a massive iron door with no visible lock or handle.



It was at this point that Severus made what he later realized was a very serious mistake: He asked his Advocatus a question.

"If Lily didn't really hate me at school but was only pretending to out of a foolish desire to protect me, why did she continue the deception for years after? Even after the Dark Lord was defeated and I continued to serve Dumbledore?"

The Advocatus hesitated and then looked at him sadly. "Because, Severus, by then she knew you had actually become a Death Eater. She knew that you had told Voldemort of the Prophecy to win a seat in his Inner Circle. And she knew that in doing so you had sent him to murder her entire family. So you see, by that point, you'd given her a *real* reason to hate you."

Snape was left speechless by what the Advocatus had said, while the Advocatus could only watch as the pain of her revelation washed over him. Then, as one, they recognized their mistake - Snape had inadvertently distracted his Advocatus with his painful question, which meant that neither of them was paying close enough attention to their surroundings to prevent the mental landscape from arbitrarily changing. They had just enough time to realize the danger when suddenly, the floor dropped out from beneath them, dropping them both into a deep pit.

As one (naturally), Severus and Lily pointed their wands at each other and cast. "**ARRESTO MOMENTUM!**" Their sudden fall slowed down to that of a leaf dropping fluttering down slowly on a windless day, and after a few seconds, they could see a floor some twenty feet below. The two allowed themselves to fall slowly for another few seconds before they simultaneously dismissed their spells so that

they could drop to the ground in preparation for an ambush.

No attack came. Instead, the two found themselves in a thirty-by-thirty room with a very high ceiling. On one wall stood a massive iron door that looked identical to the one they'd seen above. Indeed, Severus thought it was likely the *same* door existing in both locations, for that was often how geography worked in mindscapes. Environments changed, but *landmarks* were consistent. This door marked the boundary to the next level of Bellatrix's mind, and so it would appear the same wherever they sought to cross over it.

The room was sparse but not empty. There was a small raised platform near the wall opposite the door. On the left side of the platform was a side table bearing an empty candleholder and a long piece of what seemed to be cotton string. On the right side was a matching side table bearing what appeared to be bottle of wine and a small book. From the space between the two side tables, it appeared that some absent piece was meant to be placed there, most likely a chair of some kind. Along the wall behind the platform rested three cauldrons.

Then, from up above, they heard a grinding sound as the hole that had dropped them into this room closed itself up. Barely a second later, there was a loud *clang* as metal spikes popped down from the ceiling which then began to slowly drop towards them.

"*Seriously?*" Lily exclaimed as if offended by the nature of the trap. "That is perhaps the most cliched thing I've ever seen in my entire life. What, are there no train tracks for Bellatrix to tie us to?"

"No," answered Severus, "this is quite serious. It is the very fact that it *is* a cliché that gives it power over us. Quickly! The door!"

As one, Severus and Lily fired their most powerful Alohomoras at the iron door, but there was no effect. Annoyed, Severus swiftly turned his attention to the objects in the room, though he could make no sense of their purpose or arrangement. Even a quick check of the book on the side table revealed its pages to be blank.

"Think! There must be a reason that these items are here. Some clue that can help us escape."

"Why though?" Lily asked while trying unsuccessfully to transfigure a hole in the wall which seemed immune to such magic. "You realized back at the start of this whole thing that Bellatrix wasn't obligated to give you clues. And moreover, that what seemed to be clues were probably traps. What makes this room different?"

"It is the nature of the scenario. It forces us to accept the reality of a death trap with, as you noted, the ridiculous cliché of a spike-filled ceiling that slowly descends to kill us. So slowly in fact that we have time to casually discuss the matter. There *must* be a clue, a secret way to escape that we can only find through cleverness and ingenuity, because by force of narrative, that way is the *only* way out, with all other strategies doomed to failure. If she tried to cheat us here with false clues, the narrative structure of the trap would collapse, and the Alohomoras would have worked to free us. But where is the clue?"

As if in response to his question, the mad girlish voice of Bellatrix Lestrange rang out from somewhere above.

"Awww! Does widdle Sevie-Poo want a clue? Ahahahaha!"

"Oh, for God's sake," Lily muttered under her breath.

*"Let's see what you make of this then -*

*To open the door and pass beyond  
and go where you want to go,  
Just sit with your Love and drink with your Love  
and read by your Love's warm glow."*

"More riddles," Lily said sarcastically. "How ... adorable. Any ideas what all that rubbish means?"

Severus went very still with his back to Lily, while the spiked ceiling slowly continued its descent. Finally, he spoke softly and almost haltingly.

"Do ... do you think it is actually possible ... for Lily and me to be friends again?"

The Advocatus was gobsmacked. "Seriously? You think this is the proper time for discussing that?"

He turned to face her and glanced upwards. "It is possible we may never have another chance?"

Lily huffed angrily. "Fine. *Speaking as your Advocatus*, I would say it's not about getting her to forgive you for your sins anymore. You *both* need to understand and accept and forgive each other for your mistakes. Lily was and is justifiably angry that you joined Voldemort and that your recklessness and impulsiveness and desire for power endangered the lives of her husband and children. And you were and are justifiably angry that she cut you off so completely that it practically drove you into Voldemort's arms. And, worse, she later did the same thing to Harry, and in both cases, it was because she arrogantly decided to

do what she thought was best for her loved ones due to her *lifelong martyr complex!*"

Then, she wrinkled her nose thoughtfully. "And *I suppose* you're also still angry that she married someone you despise with the heat of a thousand suns. Can you ever forgive her for *that*, Severus? Moreover, do you really think you could ever maintain a friendship with her while James is in the picture? I mean, it's not like Lady Potter would put up with you continually insulting her husband in every single conversation. And I haven't even gotten to the matter of *the Other Potter*, as you still like to call him. Considering all that, do you even *want* to make up with Lily?"

Snape stood still in silent thought as the spikes drew ever closer. "I don't know," he finally said quietly.

"Well then, how about we set that aside for a while and work on solving that riddle instead?"

Snape closed his eyes and took two deep breaths before he spoke again. "I know the answer to the riddle. I knew it as soon as Bellatrix uttered the words."

Lily's brow furrowed. "What? What's the answer? Wait. Different question. How is it possible for you to know the answer but not me?"

He opened his eyes and looked long and hard at Lily's face, as if memorizing an image of her from happier days long since gone.

"You don't know it because it's a cruel riddle with a cruel answer. And I think it would break my heart if Lily were here and could have guessed the solution at once."

She shook her head in confusion. "I don't understand. What ...?"

"***SECTUMSEMPRA!***" he cried out in an anguished voice before she could finish the question. The spell struck with pinpoint precision, and Lily's body dropped to the ground, her head neatly removed from her shoulders.

Instantly, he turned away and clamped his hand over his mouth while he struggled to retain his composure.

*"It's not really her. It's not really her. It's not really her."*

He whispered the words again and again like a mantra until his emotions came back under control. Then, he moved quickly towards the body and severed head, his wand already in motion. In turn, Lily's clothing was vanished away and her head and nude body levitated over to the waiting cauldrons. Then, using spells that every good potion master knew but which were customarily meant for animal ingredients rather than human corpses (at least among every *reputable* potion master), he set to work as the spiked ceiling inched ever closer.

One spell scoured the head down to a bare skull which he levitated over to the table holding the bottle of wine. A second spell deboned and disassembled the corpse, with the bare bones going into one cauldron, all the body fat going into another, and everything else unceremoniously dropped into the last. A third spell instantly rendered the body fat into tallow before he summoned the cotton string from the table next to the candleholder. With a wave of his wand, some of the tallow flowed up around the string and hardened to make a candle.

Finally, at his command, Lily's bones flew up out of the middle cauldron towards the platform before assembling

themselves into the shape of a ghoulish and uncomfortable-looking stool that he reinforced with powerful Sticking Charms. By now, the ceiling was barely ten feet above him. Steeling his resolve once more, Snape sat down on the stool ("*sit with your Love*") and poured some of the wine into Lily's skull ("*drink with your Love*") which he then lifted to his lips and tipped back. The wine burned slightly, but there was no poison. This trap was meant to harm him in far worse ways. Finally, he placed the candle into its holder and lit it with his wand before opening the book once more. By the light of the candle ("*read by your Love's warm glow*"), words now appeared which he read aloud.

***Open, door, that I may pass beyond and find my doom.***

Severus sneered at the banality of the pass phrase even as the iron door slide open. The spikes were mere inches away as he strode out of the room without so much as a backward glance at Lily's defiled remains.

Beyond the iron door was another dark corridor, and despite his Lumos, Snape found the gloom oppressive. After a few minutes' walk, he was surprised to see what appeared to be a Gringotts vault door ahead. He focused his psychic power and cast the strongest Unlocking Charm he knew. The door slowly opened. That, Snape thought, was a bad sign. That the vault door was susceptible to *any* Charm meant that the true danger was within and that he was being lured towards it. Cautiously, he made his way into the vault.

Inside, he found a cavernous area full of golden coins and valuable antiques and arcane objects of all kinds, the skins of strange creatures (some of which Snape didn't even recognize), several enormous rack of potions in jeweled flasks, and a skull wearing a crown. There was no order or

method to the vault, just great piles of coins and precious objects that were two, even three times as tall as a man. The only thing Snape could see that was *not* priceless in some way was at once incongruous but also oddly appropriate for the demented mind he was exploring – on the far side of the room was an incredibly ornate iron maiden that was decorated with Bellatrix Lestrange's face and bound with heavy chains.

He took a few steps towards the iron maiden only to dive for cover when a high-pitched voice shrieked: "**CRUCIO!**" The curse flew over his head, as Bellatrix Lestrange emerged from behind one giant stack of gold. Simultaneously, Miss Demeanor stepped out from behind another stack on the opposite side of the room and opened fire as well. He ducked and rolled, slashing out towards Lestrange as he did. As his wand struck a pile of gold coins, he transfigured them into an enormous flurry of gold dust which he sent towards Lestrange as a dust storm (similar to the attack he used months before at Longbottom Manor, the one that ruined Augusta Longbottom's beloved Hepplewhite table). With Lestrange distracted for a few seconds, he turned to Miss Demeanor and engaged in a furious duel with her even as he tried to move towards more effective cover. His brief one-on-one battle only lasted for a few seconds, however, before Lestrange dispelled his dust storm and lashed out with a Cutting Curse that caught him in his side.

In the real world, a massive gash opened in Snape's side, and blood spurted forth. Instantly, Regulus tried to heal it, but Snape by this point was already deathly pale from blood loss, and it was not possible to feed him a Blood Replenisher while the Legilimency probe was ongoing. All Regulus and Lucius knew was that if Snape couldn't withdraw from Bellatrix's mind soon, he would die of his injuries regardless of what healing magic they brought to bear.



Snape screamed and fell to one knee as the Cutting Curse tore into him, but he managed to cast one more spell towards Miss Demeanor, a Blasting Curse that she easily dodged. Unfortunately for her, he was actually aiming for a huge mound of gold coins behind her which the explosion caused to fall on her. She tried to leap out of the way, but the coins still landed on her with enough weight to bury her from the waist down and keep her pinned. But that minor victory only opened him up to another attack from Lestrangle who disarmed him and then bound him tightly. He was briefly surprised when Lestrangle's Incarcerous spell manifested not as thick ropes but as barbed wire that cut into his skin (and produced a stigmata-like effect on his physical body that horrified Lucius and Regulus). But then, he remembered who he was dealing with and decided the alteration made perfect sense.

"Silly Sevie, Silly Sevie!" Lestrangle giggled in her disturbing high-pitched voice. "Clipped your wings at least, haven't I! No trouble at all now that you don't have your *filthy Mudblood* around to protect you! What would our Lord say about you being a disgusting *blood traitor* if he could see?!"

From across the room, Miss Demeanor shouted to Lestrangle even as she fought to free herself from the gold coins. "I imagine he would say '*Quit dawdling and KILL the blood traitor instead of making a show of it!*' That or '*Free Miss Demeanor and let her kill Snape if you can't be bothered to!*'"

"SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP!" Lestrangle screamed hysterically. "YOU CAN'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO! NOT AFTER YOU HID LIKE A COWARD IN THE CATACOMBS OF MY MIND ALL THESE YEARS! "

While the two parts of Bellatrix's mind screamed at each other, Snape considered his options. They were quite limited, especially since he was fairly certain his physical body would bleed to death soon if he couldn't end the battle quickly. He could free himself at least if he moved quickly and stealthily, but it was still a two-on-one fight with no way for him to even the odds.

"... *or is there?*" he thought as he was suddenly struck by both realization and inspiration. With a subtle gesture, his wand flew back to his hand without either woman noticing. But then, instead of immediately dispelling his bonds, he carefully turned so that his wand was pointed towards the iron maiden. He steeled himself and focused all of his psychic strength on one single (and singularly unexpected) spell.

**"*ALOHOMORA!*"**

At that, both of his attackers turned in his direction and screamed in fury, as the shackles on the iron maiden fell away and the device itself flew open. A lithe emaciated female staggered forth and nearly fell ... before she realized where she was and who stood before her. And then, the face of Bellatrix Black, aged 18, lit up in utter fury.

**"*FULMINATA!*"** she cried out while pointing the wand she'd somehow produced towards Lestrage. Snape quickly shut his eyes and braced himself as a massive bolt of lightning flew over him towards his attacker. At the last possible second, Lestrage apparated away to the top of another pile of coins on the other side of the room, but the entire vault shook from the strength of the blast, causing that stack to shift beneath her feet. Lestrage lost her balance and fell off the pile which also buried Miss Demeanor under even more coins.

By that point, Snape had freed himself from the barbed wire and made his way towards the younger Bellatrix, clutching his still-bleeding side as he ran. Instantly, she trained her wand on him.

"Do I know you?" she asked suspiciously.

"I ... don't know," he answered. "That's a surprisingly complicated question coming from you. But I was the one who freed you from confinement."

A dark cloud passed over her face. "That won't last long. They're too powerful even together. They'll lock me away again and kill you when they return."

Then, she looked Snape up and down. "Who are you and why are you here?"

Before he could answer, the girl spat out an expletive and made several violent slashes with her wand. One bodily yanked Snape to her side while another caused a wave of gold coins to rise up into the air and solidify as a shield just before a Killing Curse from Miss Demeanor could strike him dead. Snape hissed in pain and clutched his side once more.

"You don't have much time, hero!" Black shouted. "Answer the questions or get out of here!"

"I am Severus Snape. You don't know me, but your other selves do and consider me an enemy. I am here searching for information about a golden chalice that the Dark Lord gave to one of your other selves."

While he spoke, Snape slashed his own wand in concert with Black, and the two of them were barely able to maintain their protective cover against the attacks now coming from both Miss Demeanor and Lestrangle.

"What? *That* cup perhaps?" She spared a gesture towards the far side of the vault, and a chalice that did indeed resemble the Hufflepuff Cup sat atop the tallest pile of coins and artifacts in the vault.

Snape snorted. "Well, that was surprisingly easy."

"What's so important about that cup? It's not a Black artifact!"

"All I can say is that it is essential to the final destruction of the Dark Lord Voldemort!"

Black looked at him in shock. "Then what are you waiting for?! If this is my ... *her* memory palace, then obviously the *real* cup is in my *real* vault! You know what you needed to learn, so get the hell out of here!"

Snape hesitated. "No, I can still help you ...."

"Oh Morgana's Tits!" Black exclaimed angrily before drawing back an arm and slugging Snape across the jaw as hard as possible.

Instantly, Snape came to his senses back in Bellatrix's cell in Longbottom Manor as the force of the girl's blow knocked him off his chair. At the same time, however, the paralysis that held Bellatrix in place also broke, and the insane witch screamed and flung herself towards the three wizards with her hands outstretched like claws. Luckily for them, after fourteen years in Azkaban, the dreaded Bellatrix Lestrange was nowhere near as formidable in real life as she was within her own mind. Lucius casually stunned her and then conjured a straitjacket and gag to contain her.

"Merlin's bones, Severus!" Regulus exclaimed as he carefully helped Snape up off the floor. "You look like death

warmed over. What the hell has been happening all this time?!"

"I will ... I will be happy for a debriefing /cough/ once I ... am out of this bloody dungeon and have had proper medical treatment." Snape looked down in confusion. "Where are my shirt and coat?"

Regulus blushed slightly. "I, um, had to vanish them. they were too blood-soaked."

Snape nodded. "Then, we can add getting a hot bath and replacing my attire to medical treatment in the list of things I want *now!*"

The three men left Bellatrix's cell and locked it solid with the woman's unconscious and bound body still on the floor. Moments later, they had made their way back up to the main floor of Longbottom Manor with Lucius levitating the barely conscious Snape and Regulus leading the way. For his part, Snape knew he needed medical treatment and rest *before* he returned to Hogwarts, as his current condition would invite far too many questions. Still, he'd survived to bring back invaluable intelligence, and at last, it seemed his suffering was over for this day at least. Naturally, it wasn't that easy.

"SNIVELLUS!" screamed Sirius Black in a rage.

And through his blurry vision, Snape could make out the face of perhaps his most hated enemy pointing a wand at him from across the room.

"*Of course,*" Snape thought blearily. "*It seems none of my sufferings will ever be complete while there's a Marauder around to make things worse.*"

## Chapter End Notes

NEXT: All the Harry-centric stuff that got removed from this chapter because it undercut the tension and drama.

AN 1: Tentative Publication schedule.

Jan 12 - Upload of this chapter here and at AO3. Also, a full teaser of the next chapter will be posted on the Discord server

Jan 18 - Next SIB chapter on TSM's website for all Patrons.

Jan 25 - Next POS chapter (Ch 28) posted at TSM's website free for all Discord members.

Jan 28 - Ch 28 of POS posted here and at AO3.

# **Dreamscapes, Memories, and Nightmares (finale)**

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### ***Harry Potter and the Death Eater Menace***

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### ***CHAPTER 27: Dreamscapes, Memories, and Nightmares (finale)***

*18 December 1993  
Longbottom Manor  
4:15 p.m.*

By this point, Sirius Black had been essentially trapped in Augusta Longbottom's parlor for nearly two hours with only taxidermied animals for company, and he'd nearly made himself sick on watercress sandwiches and petits fours. He was quite annoyed with Hoskins, but also with himself, as he'd gradually come to realize how the elf had manipulated him into remaining in this room. Sirius was amazed – first Dobby and now Hoskins. He would need to seriously reassess his views on house elves at this rate.

The door out of the parlor remained stubbornly closed despite all the lock-picking Charms he knew, but it turned out that even returning to Grimmauld Place was no option either. The box next to the fireplace that held the Floo

powder was also spelled shut, and it, like the door exiting the parlor, was warded against him. But perhaps the most disturbing moment was when he tried looking through the keyhole to the corridor beyond and saw Hoskins just standing there watching the door with uncanny focus. Sirius didn't know if Hoskins could see *through* the door to watch him directly, but at this point, anything seemed possible. He was just about to admit defeat and simply call for Hoskins to ask for Floo powder so he could return home when, suddenly, there was a loud pop from the other side of the door. Sirius bent down to look through the keyhole again and confirmed that the elf had apparated away, no doubt after being summoned by Regulus or one of the others.

Then, Sirius's eyes widened, and he slapped his hand against his head.

"Merlin, Sirius, what an idiot you are!" he said to himself. "You've got a wand now! You can *apparate*!"

He pulled his wand out and focused his mind on the place in the manor he knew the best: the room he'd stayed in for several weeks right after his liberation from Azkaban.

"Destination, Determination and Deliberation," he muttered softly while clenching his wand tightly. Then, there was the all-too-familiar sensation of being crushed from all sides, and at once, Sirius realized what a terrible mistake he'd made. This was the first time he'd attempted apparition since his incarceration twelve years before. Which meant it was the first time he'd experienced the intensely claustrophobic sensation of apparition since he'd begun his long imprisonment in a tiny miserable cell in the worst prison in the world.



Barely a second later, he rematerialized in his former bedroom only to fall to the ground in an absolute panic and terror. He looked wildly around the room, but his resurgent trauma colored his perceptions. One second, he was in an empty yet familiar bedroom, but one seen reflected in a funhouse mirror, constantly twisting and moving. In the next second, everything around him darkened to the color of grey stone, and he was back in his cell waiting for the Dementors to return. Desperately, he crawled over to the door (whenever he was able to perceive a door rather than metal bars), and with a supreme effort, he pulled it open and fell outside ... only to find himself in one of Azkaban's labyrinthine corridors. Slowly, he pulled himself up off the floor to stagger down the hall, shaking in his delirium.

"Focus, Black! Gotta ... gotta keep movin'! Or the D... dementors'll get ya! ... *HARRY!*" He picked up speed as he staggered almost drunkenly down the hallway, occasionally stumbling and bouncing off the walls and furniture. From somewhere behind, he thought he heard movement approaching. Terrified, he held up his wand.

"***EX... EXPECTO ... PAT...PATRONUM!***" he cried out, but no Patronus appeared. The cold chill of a Dementor washed over him. Not a real Dementor, for there were none nearby, but the sense memory of one (not that Sirius could possibly tell the difference at this point). He picked up his pace, desperate to flee the tormentors that existed only in his mind. Soon, the sensation of the Dementor chill was joined by voices drawn from Sirius's twelve *years* of nightmares.

"*I'll kill you for what you've done, Traitor!*" screamed James from inside a painting on the wall of Longbottom Manor.

"*You were never my friend, were you, Black?!*" growled a suit of armor that Sirius saw as Remus in mid-

transformation.

"*What a fool you were to never see the truth about me, Sirius!*" giggled a floral arrangement on a nearby side table that Sirius perceived as a certain Norwegian brown rat.

Desperate and delirious, Sirius Black made his way through the dark sinister corridors of his own mind.

### ***Just a few minutes earlier ...***

Carefully, Regulus and Lucius maneuvered the semi-conscious Snape up out of the dungeon, after locking up the unconscious Bellatrix in her cell, gagged and bound with a straitjacket. Once back on the main floor of Longbottom Manor, Regulus called out for Hoskins.

"Hoskins is here, Mr. Regulus, and reports that your brother remains trapped in the parlor for the nonce." Then, the elf noticed the injuries to Snape. "Blimey!" he exclaimed.

"Hoskins, please fetch us any medicinal potions in the house. Mr. Snape will need them."

Hoskins stiffened his back with military precision at the order. "It will be done, Mr. Regulus." But then, just as the elf was about to pop away, he suddenly flinched and gave an annoyed grimace. "Grrr. Hoskins regrets that he spoke prematurely, Mr. Regulus. Hoskins perceives that Mr. Sirius has apparated out of the parlor where Hoskins had detained him and into the residential wing."

Regulus sighed. "Never mind him for now, Hoskins. We'll deal with him if it becomes an issue."

Hoskins bowed and popped away, as Lucius and Regulus continued to levitate the semi-conscious Snape across the room. But the "issue" arose sooner than Regulus anticipated, for at that moment, Sirius came barreling around the corner. He skidded to a stop and stared at the trio in mindless terror. The Slytherins could not have known it, but from Sirius's perspective, it wasn't three wizards before him, but rather two Dementors ... Dementors that were somehow under the command of a healthy twenty-year-old Severus Snape who sneered hatefully at him as he urged the Dementors to move in for the kill.

*"Of course,"* Sirius thought through his mental fog. *"That bastard has wanted me dead since we were kids! And now he's brought DEMENTORS to do the job for him!"*

"SNIVELLUS!" screamed Sirius Black in a rage as he fired a Cutting Curse towards the trio. Luckily it went wide, but it did manage to slice through the rope that held up an expensive chandelier. It promptly fell to the floor with a resounding crash. Regulus threw up a protective shield which Snape and Lucius hid behind.

"Was that another priceless antique?" Regulus asked, more afraid of Lady Augusta's ire now than his brother's curses.

"Regency era," Lucius said while bolstering their shield. "Expensive but reparable so long as the crystals are largely intact."

"**INCENDIO!**" Sirius bellowed, and in response a gout of fire shot out of his wand wildly around the room.

"... and not melted into slag," Lucius added ruefully.

"Dammit, Sirius!" Regulus snarled before leaping from behind the shield and rolling across the floor faster than his

brother could follow. "**EXPELLIARMUS!**" And just like that, the battle was ended. Sirius's wand went flying, and the man himself got knocked back ten feet to land on the floor in a trembling heap.

Regulus moved in his brother's direction to check him out while Lucius attended to Severus. By the time he reached Sirius, the older Black was shaking violently.

"*Please, b-b-believe me!*" Sirius cried out through tears.  
"*I'm innocent! I'm innocent! I'm innocent!*"

"You should stun him," croaked the barely-conscious Snape. "He's in the midst of a stress-induced Dementor flashback. Stun him before he swallows his own tongue or something. Then feed him two Calming Draughts and a Draught of Peace. They're in my bag."

Regulus looked at Snape in surprise and then immediately stunned his brother into unconsciousness.

"And if I feed him those, that will fix him?" he asked.

Snape barked out a laugh. "Oh no, that will just get him through the night. But if his flashbacks to Azkaban are that severe, then the psychic and physical damage will likely grow worse and worse with each successive trigger event until he dies of an aneurysm or heart attack." He smiled cruelly. "That or kills himself in despair, I suppose."

Regulus looked horrified at Snape's callous remarks. "There ... there must be *something* that can be done?!"

The Potions Master snorted. "You have no good options, Regulus. Even if he could be persuaded of your brother's innocence, Ted Tonks is still in recovery and cannot attend to him. You can hardly take him to St. Mungo's to see a

Healer *not* a part of our little conspiracy. And before you even dare to ask – no, I will not lift a finger on his behalf. I recommend you take Sirius Black home, make him as comfortable as possible, and *wait for the end*."

Then Snape gave a cruel smile. "I for one know that *I'm* looking forward to a funeral."

***Caretaker Sturgeon's Office***  
***4:20 p.m.***

"Open wide," said Remus Lupin with a cheery smile. Jim Potter grumbled and then opened his mouth as wide as he could before Lupin cast a low-level Scourgify inside. It wasn't *painful*, but it was profoundly unpleasant. Ron Weasley, who was watching the proceedings with a broad grin, had warned him that using the Charm in this manner was the magical equivalent of a Muggle parent washing out a child's mouth with soap as a punishment for naughty language, a punishment he'd suffered himself on occasion. Lily Potter was equally amused, as she recalled using the spell on the Marauders back in their school days to curb them of their tendency towards sexual innuendo after they finally developed an interest in girls.

Remus handed Jim a glass of water which the boy swished around in his mouth before spitting it out into a conjured bucket.

"Blech!" he said while making a face. "Is this really necessary?"

"It is if you don't want to spend the next two weeks with a Mandrake leaf stuck to the roof of your mouth for nothing," Lupin said authoritatively. "This approach cuts the amount of time you'll need to keep the leaf in your mouth in half, but it won't work if there's *any* particulate matter in your

mouth when the leaf is affixed. And we all *saw* you take a second helping of treacle tart at lunch today."

"It wasn't my fault!" Jim said almost offendedly. "Hermione doesn't eat desserts any more, and it would have gone to waste if *no one* ate it."

Ron laughed. "Yeah, whereas every dessert Hermione turns down that *isn't* treacle tart usually gets eaten by me without a word of complaint from you."

Meanwhile, Remus turned to his desk and *carefully* levitated a Mandrake leaf from a small box with a gesture of his wand. At his direction, Jim opened his mouth once more, and Remus floated the small leaf inside before affixing it to the roof of his mouth with a Sticking Charm. Jim made another face as he adjusted to the leaf's presence. It didn't taste nearly as bad as the soapy Scourgify, but it tasted rather unpleasantly of *sour apples*. He remarked as such to Remus, who smiled once more at the boy's expression.

"Yes, I'm afraid that's just part of the process. I hope you don't mind the taste of sour apples too much, Jim, because for the next fortnight, *everything* you eat or drink will taste of it. It's tolerable with pork and citrus fruits. Less so with things like chocolate or other desserts, I'm afraid."

"So no more treacle tart until after Christmas!" Ron said with a laugh.

"How does this differ from the normal process?" asked the ever-curious Lily. Remus had finally come clean and revealed the Secret of his identity to her after the Hogsmeade attack. As Remus and Albus had anticipated, James had mentioned his suspicions about "Malachi Sturgeon" to her and asked her to keep an eye on the

mysterious caretaker. Rather than put up with Lily spying on his every move, Remus elected to show the paper Dumbledore had created that conveyed the Secret to both her and to Ron. If for no other reason, her aid would be essential in diverting James so he didn't notice the tell-tale scent of Mandrake on his son's breath, a scent Prongs would remember all too well.

"The technique that James, Sirius, and Peter used requires the aspiring Animagus to keep a Mandrake leaf under his tongue for a full month. This frequently makes it difficult to talk and also increases the likelihood of the leaf being damaged inside the mouth. The technique Jim is using is the one practiced by the Animagi of the Uagadou School in Africa. It cuts the time needed for the Mandrake leaf in half ... at the cost of giving the Animagus breath that suspiciously - and obnoxiously - smells of apples at all times. That's not a problem in Africa where Animagery is not only legal but commonplace. It's more of an issue here in Wizarding Britain, where unregistered Animagery is highly illegal. Especially when your father is both a secret Animagus and the chief law enforcement officer for the whole country. But the alternative was to do it during the school term, and there's no way Minerva McGonagall would have missed the scent of a Mandrake leaf. Unlike Prongs, McGonagall is blessed with a feline sense of smell."

"It's a wonder she never caught James and the other two when they were going through this," Lily said. "I suppose they must have done it during the summer."

"Mmm," Lupin said while studying the Mandrake leaf now stuck inside Jim's mouth and thinking about how to change the subject.

***Mad-Eye Moody's Room at the Three Broomsticks*4:40  
*p.m.***

"So that's it," Moody said to Harry Potter. "That completes my collection of memories of people who fought Voldemort and made it to the ten-second mark. Between now and our next get-together, I want three feet of parchment on what they all did right, what they could have done better, and what a Third Year student with your admittedly slightly-above-average skills could have done to escape in those situations."

"We still haven't seen your own *personal* memory of fighting Voldemort, Mr. Moody," Harry said innocently.

"And *we* are not going to, Potter," the man replied gruffly. "I made that clear."

"I'm guessing it's because you have some incredibly awesome fighting technique that you don't want to share because you always like to have one trick no one else knows in your back pocket."

"You can make whatever guesses you like, Potter, but I'm still not sharing that memory. Now, I'm going out to use the loo. While I'm gone, start packing up your pensieve and thinking about what you've seen. If you have any final questions about anti-Voldemort tactics, you can ask 'em when I get back."

With that, Moody stumped out of his room and down the hall. Harry added to his notes and then moved to the table to shrink the pensieve down for travel. But as his wand rested above the bowl, he paused, his attention drawn to the vials neatly resting in a row along the side. He'd seen nine memories that day, but there were ten vials. And with his Occlumency-powered recall, he knew *exactly* which one



he had *not* witnessed yet. Harry glanced over to the door. Based on experience with the man's bathroom habits gleaned over months of tutoring, he knew he had at least ten minutes before Moody returned. After a few seconds of contemplation, Harry reached for the tenth vial of memories and dumped them into the pensieve. Excited at the thought of seeing his mentor in action at the height of his power and skill, Harry leaned forward and passed into the memory.

***1 January 1981***

***The Memory of Alastor Moody***

The thing that most shocked Harry was how *young* Moody looked. Harry, of course, had researched Alastor Moody's life and career. And if this was a memory of his duel with Voldemort, then the man was only thirty-five and had been awarded an Order of Merlin just a few months earlier for his role in the siege of Wilkes Manor and the death of the Death Eater known as Mr. Toymaker. As the memory came fully into focus, Harry found himself in the man's bedroom just as he was waking up for the day. The boy wasn't sure, but he suspected Moody was hungover. More disturbingly, as far as Harry was concerned, Moody apparently slept in the nude, as the boy quickly deduced from the pile of clothes on the floor next to the bed, clothes which included some old-fashioned men's underwear and what appeared to be a festive New Year's Eve Party hat. Embarrassed to have barged in on his mentor under these circumstances, Harry abashedly focused his gaze on *everything else* in the room as a healthy, young, and fully-naked Alastor Moody (who still had both legs and both eyes) sat up in bed to stretch his arms.

Aside from embarrassment, Harry's primary response to the scene was confusion. He had expected to be dumped

into a pitched battle between Moody and the Dark Lord. Had Moody brought the wrong memory today? Shaking his head, Harry moved over to a nearby dresser while behind him, Moody reached down for the clothes on the floor. On the dresser were several moving pictures, only one of which included Alastor Moody, locked in the embrace of a lovely young woman. She was in several other pictures as well, along with what looked like family members. Suddenly, Harry realized the truth of the situation and blushed. This was not Moody's room or house. It belonged to a woman with whom Moody had come home after a New Year's Eve party. Now even more embarrassed, Harry prepared himself to exit the memory when a shirtless Moody opened the door and called out almost playfully.

"Vicki? Where's my shirt?"

After a few seconds, a woman's voice replied. "A...a... Alastor?" A chill ran down Harry's back. The woman's voice wasn't playful. It was terrified.

Moody must have reached the same conclusion, for with a silent twitch of his hand, the auror's wand flew to his grasp. He tapped his head with his wand to cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself. To Harry's surprise, he could still see Moody (though he seemed slightly translucent) since this was Moody's own memory of these events. Then, the auror cast a Silencing Charm on himself before slipping out the door. Harry followed him out of the bedroom and down the stairs. Halfway down, Moody froze, as did Harry behind him.

The stairs led down to an open living room. There was a woman (Vicki, presumably) wearing what Harry guessed was Moody's missing shirt. She was stuck to a wall with tears streaming down her face. And she wasn't alone, for

Harry counted another four people also stuck to the walls of the living room: two men (one of whom was wearing a heavily-damaged Auror's coat), another woman, and a young boy perhaps no more than seven. All them appeared to be under a Silencing charm, and all of them seemed to be in mortal terror.

Understandably so, since Lord Voldemort himself was also in the room, calmly seated in an easy chair reading a Daily Prophet issue whose headline praised Moody for his handling of the Wilkes affair.

"Good morning, Auror Moody," Voldemort said without looking up. "I trust you slept well?"

For a full second, Moody stood paralyzed. And then, he pointed his wand towards Voldemort and screamed "**AVADA KEDAVRA!**" Harry was taken aback. Moody was legendary among the Aurors of the last war for having never used the Killing Curse. And it showed. Compared to all the Avada Kedavras that Harry had seen the Dark Lord cast in the prior memories, Moody's was painfully slow, and the color, while green, looked noticeably paler than usual.

Voldemort twitched his wand effortlessly, and the uniformed Auror who'd been stuck to the wall flew across the room into the path of the curse. The Auror didn't die because Moody's curse wasn't strong enough. But he *screamed* from the pain as blood shot from his mouth and green sparks danced across his body.

"MIKE!" Moody yelled in anguish. Then, he stabbed the banister with his wand, and it shattered and flew towards Voldemort in a hail of wooden stakes. The dark wizard shifted the position of his human shield, but then the stakes changed course to fly around him. Seemingly amused by

Moody's ingenuity, Voldemort quickly whipped his wand in a complicated pattern before the stakes could strike, and instantly, they reversed themselves in mid-air and flew back towards Moody. With a grunt, he leaped to safety, but one of the stakes drove through his calf. He fell to the floor with another scream, this time of pain. Voldemort rose from the chair and glided over towards him, the auror falling to the ground behind him as a weeping wreck. Desperately, Moody tried to curse the Dark Lord, but with a silent flick of Voldemort's wand, Moody was disarmed.

"Tsk, ts, Auror Moody," he said in a silky voice. "You have something lodged in your leg, it seems. Let me help you with that." Voldemort hissed a word that Harry didn't recognize, and in response, a heavy ax made of an emerald green magical force materialized out of thin air and *sliced Moody's leg off just below the knee!*

Harry staggered back in horror as Moody roared in pain and fury. He'd been expecting a duel for the ages because he knew Moody had survived an encounter with Voldemort. He'd never expected to learn that Moody only survived because Voldemort had been *toying with him*.

Blood spurted wildly from Moody's leg stump until Voldemort cast another spell instantly cauterizing the wound. "There," he said almost mildly. "I've stopped the bleeding, though I fear that leg will never accept any sort of magical regeneration. Nor any sort of magical prosthesis that doesn't cause you intense pain. But you're a strong man, Auror Moody. I'm sure you can handle a little pain ... for the rest of your life."

'You ... bastard!' Moody spat. "Kill me and get it over with! I know that's why you're here! But leave the others out of it!"

"Ah, yes!" Voldemort exclaimed as he gestured towards the terrified figures on the wall. "Let us introduce our honored guests. Your lover, Victoria Manford. Your fellow Auror and partner of many years, Michael Proctor. And lastly, your younger brother, Aethon Moody; his wife, Adrienne Carlyle Moody; and their adorable moppet of a son, Nestor Moody. The very last of the Moody line, am I right?"

Voldemort sneered at the stricken man. "I'm told you have many friends, Auror Moody, but these, I believe, are the only people you *love*. Today's lesson, Auror Moody, will be to teach you the futility and pointlessness of that puerile emotion. I hope I prove a worthy instructor."

"Why, you bastard, why? I suppose you consider Mike an enemy soldier like me. But what's the point in killing a bunch of civilians?! Revenge for me killing Wilkes? Don't tell me you actually *cared* for that lunatic?!"

Voldemort laughed. "Cared? Of course not. No Dark Lord worthy of the name has *friends* worth caring about!" Then, he darted forward and knelt by Moody, his wand under the man's chin.

"But there *are* people we *value*, Moody. Men and women of true genius whose importance to the cause is inestimable. Erasmus Wilkes was such a genius."

"He was a bloody mass-murdering psychopath!"

Voldemort blinked in bemusement. "Your point? Whatever deficiencies you saw in his mental health do not change the fact that *he was valuable to me*! By killing him, you have set my plans back more than anyone else still alive, *including Albus Dumbledore himself*. I would congratulate you, but unfortunately, your actions compel me to deliver a harsher response."

"Killing my loved ones, you mean? And then what? After you've murdered the people I care about, are you gonna blind me like poor Nancy Kent?"

Voldemort sniffed. "I rarely repeat myself when I can avoid it, at least not with my grander gestures." He tilted his head as he studied Moody's face. "No, I think I'll just take one eye. That way, you'll still have another eye in whose reflection others will see how haunted you are by the memories of this day."

Then, the Dark Lord rose to survey the room. "And you're mistaken in my intentions, Auror Moody. I am not here to kill *anyone*. Or at least, not unless *persuaded* to do so."

"... what?" Moody said slowly. Nearby, Harry put his hands over his mouth. Somehow, his strange Legilimency powers had given him insight once more like a kaleidoscope clicking into place. But the image revealed this time was both horrific and sickening. Somehow, he *knew* what Voldemort was going to do next.

"I will not kill any of these people. *Instead, I will drive them utterly mad* with the Cruciatus Curse. *But*, I shall do so with such skill that they will live on, unaware of their surroundings and trapped in their own bodies, *while still experiencing the effects of the Cruciatus for the rest of their lives!*" Voldemort gave a sickening laugh while Moody gaped at the Dark Lord in horror and helpless fury.

"That will be the fate of all your loved ones unless ... unless you can persuade me to grant them a more merciful fate, if no less a permanent one. The decision is yours, Auror Moody. Shall I curse these people to agonizing madness? Or will you beg me - truly beg me with absolute sincerity - to *kill them instead*? That is the choice I offer

you. That is the price you shall pay for depriving me of one of my most valued servants. And when we are done, perhaps your fellow Aurors will learn from your mistakes. Mistakes for which these good people will pay the price."

By now, Moody was practically babbling as he begged Voldemort not to do this. Meanwhile, Harry Potter stood utterly transfixed, unable to move. Part of him desperately wanted to flee this memory. But another part – his Gryffindor part, he assumed – demanded that he stay and watch, because having intruded this far into a scene of such depravity, he felt a strange obligation to bear witness on behalf of these poor victims.

Voldemort looked around at his hostages before his gaze returned to Victoria Manford's tear-stained face. He tilted his head quizzically, and instinctively, Harry knew he was studying the woman with Legilimency. Then, he cast a wordless Charm on the woman that caused faint runes to appear in the air over her. He laughed viciously and turned back to Moody.

"What a delightful turn of events! Tell me, Auror Moody. Did you have any idea that your lover is *pregnant*!"

That finally broke Harry's paralysis. He choked out a sob of horror and took a step back with the intention of exiting the pensieve. But before he could, he jumped in surprise as a beefy hand clamped down on his shoulder and he was bodily *pulled* out instead. After a moment's disorientation, Harry found himself back in Moody's room and staring up into the face of the man himself. For once, Moody's fake eye wasn't spinning wildly. It was focused on him with an exact and frightening precision.

"Well, Potter," Moody said in a bitterly cold voice. "Any questions?"

Harry's jaw moved but no coherent sounds emerged. His eyes were wet with tears. "I ... I...."

Moody silently gestured with his wand, and the memory flowed out back into its container. Then, he tapped the bowl which shrank down to pocket-size.

"Get out," he said without looking at the boy.

Harry wiped his eyes and pocketed the pensieve. Then, he pulled the Invisibility Cloak over his head and opened the door. He paused for a moment at the threshold and looked at Moody whose back was to him. He opened his mouth to speak, but still no words would come. Finally, he gave up and left the room.

After all, what could he possibly say.

***Twenty minutes later ...***

Dejected and still shame-faced by what he'd done to his own mentor, Harry made his way down the tunnel that led from Honeydukes back into the castle only to be reminded that things could always get worse. On the secret doorway on the tunnel side he found, of all things, a scrap of parchment affixed to the door with Spello-tape. And to his amazement, there was a message scrawled on it for *him*.

*Potter -*

*When you return, come see me about your detention.  
Unless you return after curfew, in which case, see me about  
your suspension.*



- *Scrimgeour*

Harry closed his eyes and shook his head as he wondered how this day that had started off so well had ended up such a disaster.

*"Oh yeah,"* he thought to himself. *"It was because I'm an arrogant git."*

After checking the Map to make sure no one was on the other side, Harry opened the passage door and entered Hogwarts. He took a brief side-trip to return Jim's cloak before heading up to the DADA classroom. Then, he paused to adjust his tie and primp his hair before rapping on the door three times.

"Enter," said Rufus Scrimgeour on the other side. As Harry entered, the man gave a curious smile. "Well, Slytherin Potter, I must say this is a surprise. My note did not specify, but I was expecting your brother to have been the one to read it. Sneaking off to Hogsmeade for candy and a look at the latest Quidditch paraphernalia seems more of a Gryffindor move."

Harry shrugged. "It wasn't for candy or Quidditch, sir. I had a previously-scheduled lesson with my tutor in Hogsmeade, and it would not have been possible to reschedule it during the holidays."

Scrimgeour's eyebrows shot up. "And who is your tutor, dare I ask?"

Harry hesitated but then decided it wasn't exactly a secret. "Alastor Moody."

"Is he really? How extraordinary. I must say that it wounds me to learn that my DADA classes are so unengaging that

you feel the need to take extra tuition to compensate for it."

Harry winced. "Not at all, Professor. I've found all my teachers here at Hogwarts to be excellent instructors." The name *Binns* flashed across his mind, but he ignored it. "My lessons with Mr. Moody are merely on ... specialized topics."

"With Alastor?" Scrimgeour laughed. "I imagine they would be. Still, that leaves me with a dilemma. The Headmaster has forbidden travel to Hogsmeade by those who lack the power to defend themselves from Dementors, which includes you. I can, of course, pass along my discovery of your transgression to the Deputy Headmistress or your Head of House and let them determine appropriate punishment. Or we keep it just between the two of us. What's your preference?"

The boy hesitated and actually dilated for a few seconds. He wondered what Scrimgeour's game was, because he was certain it was about more than disciplinary infractions. Then, he wondered if Scrimgeour could tell he was dilating, and he instantly let it lapse.

"What punishment would *you* propose, sir?"

Scrimgeour looked up at the ceiling as if he were just now considering the matter and had not already determined his proposed punishment hours earlier.

"One-hundred lines. '*I will not violate safety rules put into place for my own wellbeing.*' After which, we will spend two hours in academic discussion about *this*."

As he spoke, he held up his personal copy of the Sirius Black trial transcript. Harry blinked. He'd spent weeks poring over the transcript to no end. Had he not heard Sirius's side of the story from his own mouth, he'd have

found the document completely plausible. Of course, plausible was not the same as believable. Harry sensed there was *something* wrong with the transcript – and possibly something that Scrimgeour had also found suspicious – but he was unable to identify it himself.

"I would be happy to submit to that punishment, Professor Scrimgeour. After dinner?"

"Actually, I was going to propose having a house elf bring dinner for us so you could work through and finish early. I know you're leaving for the holidays tomorrow. Have you even started packing?"

Harry blushed. "Err, no actually. I suppose it would be fine to eat here so we could get done at a reasonable hour. One-hundred lines, you said?"

Scrimgeour nodded, and Harry set himself to the required work. To Harry's mild surprise, Scrimgeour summoned Tweak, the house elf charged with overseeing House Slytherin. Harry steadfastly ignored the elf and hoped Scrimgeour wouldn't notice that they'd interacted before. Tweak was no help in that regard, as he repeatedly glanced over at Harry with obvious disdain. After receiving Scrimgeour's instructions, the house elf popped away, and Scrimgeour sat down to review his own copy of the transcript and make some notes in the margins.

About an hour later, Tweak returned with a large wicker basket from which he produced several platters and bowls of food, along with plates, goblets, silverware, and a large pitcher of pumpkin juice.

"How are you coming along, Potter?" the professor asked.

"Almost done sir. About fifteen more lines."

"Hmm. Well, would you mind if I went ahead and ate? I skipped lunch today."

"Not at all, sir," Harry said courteously. "Please, don't wait on my account."

Scrimgeour limped over to the table where Tweak had left their repast and puttered about for a moment before preparing a plate and goblet for himself. About five minutes later, Harry placed his parchment on Scrimgeour's desk and then fixed a plate for himself. The two ate in companionable conversation for about twenty minutes. Scrimgeour asked how Moody was, and Harry gave an evasive response that the older man thankfully didn't press.

After they'd finished eating, Tweak returned to clear the table, though at Scrimgeour's insistence, he left the pitcher of pumpkin juice, for which Harry was grateful. He'd suddenly found himself unaccountably thirsty, most likely because Scrimgeour kept the DADA classroom on the warm side. Their bellies full, the two began a lively discussion of the Black transcript.

It was a rather long transcript considering it consisted almost entirely of a single witness under Veritaserum. At the start of trial, three sworn affidavits were introduced: one each from James and Lily Potter, and a third sealed affidavit from "Witness 3." All three affidavits confirmed that Sirius Black had been the Potters' Secret Keeper and that he'd revealed the Secret to "Dark Lord #1" which was how court proceedings of the day referred to You-Know-Who. Next came an expert's report submitted by an anonymous Unspeakable establishing to a legal certainty that it was impossible to compel a Secret Keeper to reveal the Secret they kept except voluntarily.

This was deemed sufficient to hold Sirius Black for questioning under Veritaserum. And under that potion's effects, Sirius admitted to having been a Death Eater for just over a year. He was not yet marked but would have been soon as reward for leading Voldemort to the Potters. The interrogation did not delve into *why* James Potter's longtime best friend had become a Death Eater and a traitor, but it did dig quite ferociously into what he'd done as a Death Eater. Among the individuals who he'd put under the Imperius Curse and compelled to serve Voldemort were Lucius Malfoy, Tiberius Nott, Andrew Parkinson, Gregory Goyle Sr., Wilbur Crabbe and dozens of other equally respectable wizards. His testimony also went into lurid detail about what crimes he'd compelled those respectable wizards to perform, crimes including felony Muggle-baiting, murder, arson, and rape. At one point, he alluded to a deep personal hatred of Slytherins as a motive for trying to destroy the reputations of so many upstanding graduates of that house.

"So," Scrimgeour asked. "What do you think about Black's confession? Seems rather thorough, does it not?"

Harry took another sip of juice to stall while he tried to come up with an answer. "Thorough, yes. But isn't it unusual for someone to be sent to Azkaban just for their own testimony under Veritaserum? What about memory alterations?"

"The witness's chair in the Wizengamot courtroom has the same properties as a Remembrall. It will instantly reveal whether the witness has been subjected to any memory-altering spells. Likewise, both your parents would have been asked to handle Remembrall's before signing a magical affidavit."

"True. Still there must be ... something ...." Harry finished rather lamely.

"Must there? Most people would think this testimony remarkably straight forward." Scrimgeour leaned forward. "Tell me, Slytherin Potter. You obviously have doubts about Black's conviction. Why?"

Harry visibly struggled with the question. He wished he could simply say "*Well, I've met, Black and I believe his story.*" He took another slow sip and licked his lips cautiously.

"What do you know about the events from my First Year involving Professor Quirrell and the Mirror of Erised?"

Scrimgeour leaned back slowly in his chair. "A provocative change of topic. I know the basics, I think. Quirrel was, in some capacity, an agent of You-Know-Who, and Albus arranged for him to come to Hogwarts as DADA professor in order to lure You-Know-Who into a trap of some kind."

Harry frowned. "If I may ask, sir, why do you call him You-Know-Who? I know Professor Dumbledore encourages people to use his real name."

"Yes, except it's *not* his real name, is it. And due to the political situation and the limitations imposed by the Fidelius, we can't exactly call him Tom. Anyway, I generally call him You-Know-Who for two reasons. One is that there were several relatively plausible rumors during the last war indicating that he had some sort of sensory powers pertaining to the unauthorized use of the name Voldemort. The exact scope of that power is nebulous – it seems absurd that he should instantly know whenever someone says his name in a derogatory way and be instantly able to apparate himself there and revenge himself, but there were enough

people who believed such twaddle to make it socially unacceptable to say *Voldemort* in public."

Harry nodded. "And the other reason?"

"I got tired of cowardly cretins shrieking in terror every time I said the name in front of them."

"Fair enough. Anyway, *You-Know-Who* currently exists in some kind of spirit form, and he was physically possessing Professor Quirrell. On the last night he was here ... I sort of got into a conversation with him. I was stalling for time to keep him from killing me and some of my friends, and while I was, he said something about the person who betrayed my family that didn't make sense, so I asked him when Sirius Black entered his service. He had no idea what I was talking about."

"My word, Slytherin Potter. You *do* lead an interesting life. And from that brief exchange, you conclude that this official document of the Wizengamot, signed by three esteemed if anonymous judges and countersigned by the official Scribe of the Wizengamot, is *fake*?"

Harry opened his mouth to respond but then got sidetracked. "How can the judges be *esteemed* if they're also *anonymous*?"

Scrimgeour smirked. "The Death Eater Laws. The Wizengamot got tired of its judges being assassinated every time they publicly ruled against Death Eaters. So, it established the Blind Panel, a group of twelve highly-esteemed wizards and witches who would agree to serve as judges in all Death Eater-related trials. The Wizengamot picked them in a closed session with every Lord and Lady in attendance swearing a rather stringent secrecy oath to never reveal who served on the panel. Until *You-Know-*

Who's defeat was confirmed, every single trial involving an accused Death Eater was heard by three of those judges, randomly chosen, in a closed courtroom with Dementors serving as unofficial bailiffs. Witnesses for and against the defendant would be subject to perception-filtering spells that prevented them from recognizing any of the judges."

Scrimgeour paused. "Mind you, that didn't stop some of them from getting murdered anyway. *Everyone* in the Wizengamot who wasn't a collaborator or worse was treated as a target by the Death Eaters."

"And even after all these years, no one knows the names of any of the judges?!" Harry asked.

"Well, we know one of them was Albus Dumbledore. He publicly revealed himself as one of the judges and also vouched for the other eleven, despite his own personal misgivings about the Death Eater Laws, in order to reassure the public that the Blind Panel would be neither a rubber stamp for Barty Crouch nor a corrupted body that would let Death Eaters escape justice." He gestured at the top of the front page of the transcript. "These four sigils here are actually the occluded names of the three judges who heard Black's case along with the official seal of the Scribe testifying that the transcript is a true-and-accurate copy of what was actually said."

He leaned back in his chair again. "So, I ask you once more – do you have any reason to doubt the authenticity of this document?"

Harry grimaced. "Only a gut feeling, sir ... though one I suspect you share, perhaps?"

Scrimgeour smiled at the boy. "Tell me, Slytherin Potter. I gather you were raised – *poorly*, I'm told – by Muggles. Are



you familiar with the Muggle fictional character known as *Sherlock Holmes*?"

Harry ignored the dig at the Dursleys, though he did wonder how much Scrimgeour really knew about his upbringing. "I'm ... familiar with Sherlock Holmes, but I never had chance to read any of the books."

"I highly recommend them. A Halfblood friend introduced me to them when I was your age. It was a life-changing event."

Harry perked up at Scrimgeour's heartfelt recommendation of Muggle literature. "Life-changing, sir?"

"Oh yes! You see, Potter, like you, I am a natural Legilimens. Like you, my Legilimency manifests as a preternatural deductive genius. But when I was a lowly Third Year, I honestly didn't know what I was. I had not heard the terms 'Legilimency' or 'deductive genius.' I didn't understand that I had a special ability, and more importantly, I didn't appreciate what it meant that others *did not* have that ability. That people might think it strange or off-putting or even infuriating when I would blurt out things that others meant to keep secret but which were perfectly obvious to me. And then, I discovered that the Muggles had a fictional character – an internationally famous and greatly *admired* fictional character – who could do the things I did. It was ... astonishing."

Scrimgeour shook his head.

"But I digress. The point about Sherlock Holmes I wanted to make actually refers to one specific story which I found quite instructive when I read it. *The Adventure of Silver Blaze*, in which the Great Detective must solve a robbery and an apparent murder, and he constantly baffles those

around him by continually suggesting that the most interesting facet of the case was '*the curious incident of the dog in the night-time*.' I find that story to be quite relevant to the issue of the Black transcript."

Harry absorbed that and hoped his expression wasn't as clueless as he felt. "So ... what was the dog doing in the night-time?" he finally asked.

"Nothing," Scrimgeour. "The dog did nothing during the night."

Harry stared at the man. "... okay?"

Scrimgeour sighed as if disappointed in his student's reasoning abilities. "The dog was a guard dog, Potter, and the fact that it did not bark during the night meant that the criminal was someone known to it – the dog's owner, in fact – rather than an intruder. I learned an important criminological lesson from that story. Namely, sometimes, the glaring absence of a clue is itself a clue." He leaned forward to stare intently into Harry's eyes. "So, with that in mind, I ask you: What *should* be in Sirius Black's confession that *isn't there*?"

Harry blinked a few times and then closed his eyes in concentration. After a few seconds, he took another swig of pumpkin juice with his brow still furrowed in thought. It took him nearly a minute until his eyes shot open wide and he gasped out the answer.

"The trial court asked Sirius broadly to describe every crime he performed on Voldemort's behalf, and he listed a bunch of influential accused Death Eaters who he claimed to have put under the Imperius. But he was an Auror by this point with access to the whole Ministry, and yet he never tried to Imperius any fellow Aurors or other government

officials. And until Halloween of 1981, he never took the opportunity to kill my father, even though James Potter was a public symbol of opposition to Voldemort."

"Well done, Potter, though the gap in testimony is wider than you know. Are you familiar with the Order of the Phoenix?"

"Vaguely. Wasn't it some anti-Voldemort group put together by the Headmaster during the War?"

"It was, indeed. And Black, along with your father, were important members of it. *And he never tried to subvert it either.* He didn't even try to spy on it or the Ministry. But he did find time to engage in incredibly complicated schemes to get close to Wizengamot members who normally did not travel in his social circle at all."

Harry leaned back in his chair excitedly. "It's fake. It has to be. But how could someone have done this given your description of how the judging panels work? And why Sirius?"

"Who says its just Black? There were four other people liberated from Azkaban along with him. Could any of them also be innocent?"

"I seriously doubt it, from what I've heard," Harry scoffed.

"Well, then, why *were* those other four taken from Azkaban?" Scrimgeour asked in apparent bafflement. "What other purpose incidental to freeing the innocent Sirius Black could have justified liberating those four?"

Harry nodded excitedly. "It was because they were Voldemort's true inner circle. They were the only ones who

might have known any useful details about Voldemort's Horcruxes...."

Harry stopped suddenly in mid-sentence and looked directly into Scrimgeour's eyes. The man smirked at him in victory. Then, he looked down at the goblet of pumpkin juice still in his hand, the one he'd been drinking from all night but which somehow never quenched his thirst.

"You put Veritaserum in my juice," he said simply.

"Yes," Scrimgeour answered calmly.

Harry nodded. "And you never thought it was Jim who sneaked into Hogsmeade. You arranged for this detention specifically for me tonight, and you assigned me lines so I'd be distracted *while you put Veritaserum in my juice.*"

"Yes on all counts," the older man said once more. "It was most convenient of you to commit a disciplinary infraction today worthy of detention. You have remarkable self-discipline and poise for a son of James Potter. My fallback plan was to manipulate one of your peers into picking a fistfight with you after the Christmas Break."

"Well, I guess it's good it didn't come to that," Harry said sarcastically. "Isn't it, I dunno, *dangerous* to use Veritaserum like this? And especially on a minor?"

The man scoffed. "Please, Harry, I am *quite* experienced with this. It was only one drop, diluted by a whole pitcher of juice. Enough to loosen your tongue without presenting any health risks."

A beat passed. "*WHY DID YOU PUT VERITASERUM IN MY JUICE?!*" Harry asked in utter consternation.

Scrimgeour laughed at the outburst. "Well, I suppose you can really blame Albus for it. He made me promise not to use Legilimency on my students, so this was really the only way."

Harry looked around the room in dismay. First, he'd ruined his relationship with Mad-Eye Moody. And now, he'd exposed Regulus's conspiracy to a former Chief Auror. At least he hadn't exposed Regulus himself - the conspirators had all sworn secrecy oaths, and the watered down Veritaserum wasn't strong enough to overcome them regarding anything specifically included in the oath (which unfortunately did not include the Horcruxes). Harry wondered suddenly if thirteen was too young to be sent to Azkaban.

"What happens now?" he asked sullenly.

"That rather depends on how you answer my next few questions. What is your agenda towards Voldemort?"

Harry looked up at the man almost defiantly. "We want to utterly destroy him. In addition to Tom Riddle's diary, we've already destroyed another Horcrux and have leads for a third."

Scrimgeour nodded, apparently pleased with the response. "*Is Sirius Black innocent?*"

"Yes. The Potters' real Secret Keeper was Peter Pettigrew. He memory-charmed my parents into believing it was Sirius. Pettigrew was a Death Eater. And still is."

The man paused as he absorbed that. "Your parents both submitted magical affidavits swearing that Sirius Black was the Secret Keeper. Such affidavits cannot be fooled by a Memory Charm."

"Well Pettigrew found a way!" Harry said angrily.

Scrimgeour shrugged at the exclamation. "Who else is in your conspiracy?"

Harry shook his head. "No. We've got oaths for that."

"Good," he said almost cheerfully. "I was beginning to wonder if you'd bothered to put *anything* under a secrecy oath. Are the Death Eaters who are *not* Sirius Black firmly secured?"

"Yes. They're not going anywhere until we're done with them."

"And then?" Scrimgeour asked.

Harry hesitated again, this time because he honestly didn't know the answer. "That ... is not something I've been allowed to be a part of." He swallowed. "I *assume* they'll all be killed, and then their bodies delivered to the Ministry somehow."

"Except for Sirius Black's, of course."

"I ... don't know. I mean, I know he won't be killed. But I hadn't really thought about how to handle him not being returned along with the others."

"Well, you're thirteen. I wouldn't expect you to have to think of everything." Scrimgeour paused. "Well, unless your co-conspirators were twelve and under, but that seems a bit precocious even for you."

He sat back and looked up at the ceiling while idly tapping his finger on his desk. "Has your conspiracy *at least* put

some thought into resolving the fundamental problem with proving Sirius Black's innocence?"

Harry did a double-take. "Honestly, we've mainly been focused on finding and destroying Horcruxes. So, um, what *is the* fundamental problem that obviously I've never considered?"

Scrimgeour glowered at him. "Merely the fact that overturning his conviction necessarily means disqualifying the evidence that cleared a half-dozen people *who currently sit on the Wizengamot* of being Death Eaters, as well as dozens of family members of other seat holders. A sizeable percentage of our government is implicated if Black's confession is thrown out. And none of them are going to simply sit back and let that happen. Not when it would be so much easier for Sirius Black to simply *disappear* in the night before his claims of innocence can be addressed."

He shook his head. "I mean honestly, Potter! I'm assuming Lucius Malfoy is involved in this business somehow, and I *know* he's realized that clearing Black put his neck back on the block for being a willing Death Eater! Have you at least set aside a cache of blackmail evidence against him in preparation for that day he decides to murder you?"

"... um," said Harry slowly.

"Oh for Merlin's sake, Potter! I know you're young, but you shouldn't be *that* naïve at thirteen! When I was a Third Year, my blackmail folder filled two banker's boxes! And that was just fellow students!"

Both the Slytherins were silent for a moment. Harry actually had to stop himself from drinking another sip of the tainted pumpkin juice. Finally, Scrimgeour spoke again.

"Over the Christmas break, you will meet with your conspiracy and tell them what I have learned. Whoever you designate as spokesman for your group will contact me. We will meet at a mutually agreeable location and discuss ... well, everything. If we can come to terms, then I will swear appropriate oaths to join with your conspiracy. If we cannot, then I will expose you all. Please advise your allies that, *of course*, I will keep certified memory copies of this conversation in safe locations and ensure that they will be delivered to the authorities if I am betrayed."

"You ... want to join us?" Harry asked in amazement,

"I *want* to destroy You-Know-Who before he returns to full power," said Scrimgeour. Then, after a beat, he added: "I also want to be the Director of the DMLE. Do mention that to Lucius ... or whoever is filling the "Lucius niche" in the unlikely event I've guessed wrong about his involvement."

He smiled almost warmly. "It's good to have multiple goals, especially when they are congruent."

A mostly one-sided conversation between Harry and Scrimgeour continued for another half-hour before the boy was sent on his way. He went straight to the Prince's Lair to ask the Hydra a question that was suddenly of burning importance.

"*How is it possible that Rufus Scrimgeour was never a Prince?!*" he nearly spluttered.

There was a brief susurrations from all nine heads before Ka finally spoke.

"There was great interest in him from his earliest days at Hogwarts," said the mighty cobra. "But the Exemplars of Subtlety and Ambition exercised their vetoes. Delilah found



him charmless and abrasive, which, to be fair, he was in his youth."

Delilah hissed disdainfully to Harry's surprise. It put lie to Lucius's earlier comment that the boomslang "liked everybody."

"And you, Rajah?" Harry asked respectfully.

"He lacked ambition," the silver basilisk said without elaboration.

"Lacked... ambition?! Until he was forced into retirement with a crippling injury, he was the third most powerful person in the British wizarding government."

"True," said Rajah, "but never by design or choice. Rufus Scrimgeour rose to such heights by dint of brilliant and overwhelming competence. He was continually promoted into higher-ranking positions he did not want simply because no one else was remotely as qualified. But if he'd had any choice in the matter, he would have never risen above the rank of low-level field investigator. Never has he had any ambition beyond solving crimes and other puzzles."

Harry considered that and asked a few more questions before returning to his room to pack for the next day's journey. It would be a long day. As the boy laid down to bed, he consoled himself with the hope that Regulus, Lucius, and Snape would have some sort of plan for dealing with Scrimgeour. He also took comfort in the fact that this wretched day was over. He truly felt as though he couldn't cope if something *else* went wrong.

*19 December 1993*  
Longbottom Manor

## Bellatrix's Cell in the Dungeon

7:30 a.m.

Early the next morning, the woman awoke in her cell, sat up, and looked around. She was not sure if she was Bellatrix Lestrange or Miss Demeanor at the moment. All she knew for sure was that she was an unarmed witch in a dank cell somewhere, gagged and straitjacketed. Her two selves had a brief nonverbal argument over the question who should be in charge before they agreed that Miss Demeanor had the requisite skills for their current situation and thus should take point. Bellatrix Lestrange would withdraw until they encountered someone whose brutal murder would not draw attention to their activities.

Miss Demeanor laid back on the floor and then kicked up with her legs, gracefully jumping up from the ground to land on her feet. Then, she spent several minutes carefully studying her surroundings. She may have been bound, gagged, and locked away in some dungeon cell, but the fools had not bothered to restrict her movements. More fool them.

Her study of the cell complete, Miss Demeanor moved very close to one of the walls, close enough to rest her left shoulder against it. Then, she bit down hard on the gag, pulled her shoulder back, and *slammed* it into the wall hard enough to produce an audible pop as her shoulder dislocated. After taking a second to catch her breath, she did the same thing for her right shoulder. She never once screamed though the pain was intense. Phase one of her escape completed, she set to work on wriggling free of the straitjacket.

And while Miss Demeanor worked in total silence, Bellatrix Lestrange laughed and giggled and sang terrifying nursery

rhymes as she patiently waited her turn.

## Chapter End Notes

AN 1: Thanks to the following eagle-eyed Discord members for help in editing this chapter:

darkphoenix31, FeatheryMinx, Emily, LordBritish, Scrubbius, patronus, Wonder Momoko, MihelRika, nispeed, VSPV, Kardenal13, RB13, TrendyTreky, feauxen, and of course, the implacable Ozzie.

AN 2: VERY Tentative release schedule.

2/11/19 – The next (and possibly penultimate) chapter of Strangers In Boston, available on my website to my patrons.

2/18/19 – Chapter 112 of POS available early on my website to Discord followers.

2/21/19 – Chapter 112 of POS posted here and on AO3.

NOTE HOWEVER that Ch 112 will be one of those annoying chapters to write because things are happening in different locations simultaneously, so it's entirely possible I'll blow through these dates.

AN 3: Huzzahs! The Sinister Man's Discord server has broken 1100 members! If you want to see future chapters a few days early and also discuss POS or Harry Potter in general with like-minded fans, check it out.

Also, we are closing in on the elusive 10,000 Favs on . We currently stand at 9898.

AN 4: As noted above, the Sinister Man's first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is nearly complete. During the month of March, I'll hopefully complete the process of getting it published on Amazon for Kindle users.

More info to come soon.

# The Blackest Day

***Harry Potter  
and the Death Eater Menace***

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***Harry Potter and all associate characters and  
situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no  
claim to ownership.***

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## ***CHAPTER 28: The Blackest Day***

**19 December 1993**

Longbottom Dungeon

10:00 a.m.

While Miss Demeanor had received considerable training in escapology (among many other obscure and illicit abilities), she was disappointed in how more than a decade in Azkaban had degraded her physical skills. In retrospect, it might have been better to regularly assume control over the damaged Bellatrix Lestrange persona despite the risk that Dementor exposure would damage the psychic matrix that represented her sense of identity. If nothing else, she'd have kept up this body's physical conditioning in preparation for eventual escape.

*"Pointless to regret the past,"* Miss Demeanor thought to herself. *"If wishes were hippogriffs, hags would fly."*

Her physical difficulties were exacerbated by that same relentlessly annoying second personality with whom she shared a body. At most, Bellatrix Lestrange would give her a few minutes of peace and quiet in which to work before

loudly haranguing her about how long it was taking them to get out of the straitjacket. As a result, a task that should have taken 30 minutes even in her weakened state instead took several hours. Admittedly, part of that delay was caused by Miss Demeanor finally losing her temper and simply granting Bellatrix direct control. The other woman quickly demonstrated she had no idea how to get out of a straitjacket, and her hysterical efforts not only tightened their bonds but exhausted them both to the point that they had to rest for a while.

Miss Demeanor resumed control, and a chastened Bellatrix finally shut up long enough for her to free them from the jacket. Then, she moved to the cell door and sat cross-legged before it while focusing her mind on the arrangement of spells that secured the door.

*"What are you doing now?!"* Bellatrix thought furiously.  
*"Cast a wandless Alohomora and let us out! I know you can!"*

*"I can cast a wandless Alohomora,"* Miss Demeanor thought back through the mental equivalent of gritted teeth. *"But I can also perceive that the door is protected by powerful locking charms that can resist that spell, as well as warding charms to alert others if magic is used to open it. Do you know how to bypass such wards?"*

*"... no,"* Bellatrix thought sullenly.

*"Then be silent and let me work. This may take hours, and every minute of delay increases the likelihood of our discovery. It is a miracle we have not been found out already."*

Though she could not know it, the *"miracle"* that had protected Miss Demeanor from discovery so far would

continue for some time. By a stroke of luck, her efforts to escape would take place against the backdrop of several events taking place elsewhere that would monopolize her captors' attention.

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### ***Meanwhile in a conference room upstairs ...***

As Miss Demeanor struggled with the herculean task of wandlessly bypassing multiple high-level wards, the adult members of the "Azkaban Conspiracy" were upstairs engaged in pitched debate. Harry had contacted Regulus by mirror immediately upon returning to his dorm room and informed him of the horrifying news. Rufus Scrimgeour, the former Chief Auror, was aware of their activities, though he only knew for certain of Harry's involvement and strongly suspected that of Lucius. Lord Malfoy was not amused. The others in attendance – Regulus, Lady Augusta, and Severus Snape – weren't much happier.

"Well," said Reg, "look on the bright side. He doesn't *know* for certain who is part of our treasonous little group nor where our prisoners are hidden. That's ... something at least."

"Hmmpf," snorted Lucius. "He *suspects* my involvement, and where Scrimgeour is concerned, suspicion might as well be a cold certainty. Meanwhile, *you* are still believed to be dead, Severus has the patronage of Albus Dumbledore, and *no one* would suspect the Longbottom Regent of being complicit in freeing the Lestranges from Azkaban. I find myself feeling ... *exposed*."

"Nevertheless," said Augusta calmly between sips of tea, "will you meet with him as he requested?"

Lucius laughed aloud at the absurdity of the suggestion. "Alas, dear lady, I find that I have a scheduling conflict. Originally, I had planned to meet Draco this evening and take him home to the Manor for the holidays. However, I have since concluded that spending the holidays in a big empty manor house still haunted by memories of Narcissa might not be good for my son. And so, I've sent word for him to disembark at the Paris station where I will collect him, and we will spend the holidays in the City of Lights."

"Uh-huh," said Reg drily. "And *when exactly* did you decide to spare your son the trauma of a Christmas break on British soil?"

"Two minutes after you woke me up this morning to tell me about Scrimgeour's involvement," Lucius answered defiantly as he rose from the table. "Do send word if Scrimgeour is *truly* someone with whom we can deal. If he's not, then don't bother. I imagine I'll read all about it in the papers from the comfort of some wizarding nation that has no extradition treaty with Magical Britain."

He bowed respectfully to Augusta and then left the room for the Floo. Reg glowered at him as he departed.

"Well, to be fair," he said ruefully, "did any of us *really* trust him to stick with us to the end?"

Augusta clucked her tongue, while Snape, still injured and exhausted from the previous day's activities, said nothing. Finally, Augusta spoke.

"I will meet with Scrimgeour. He and I were at Hogwarts together, so perhaps I may be able to exercise some influence over him. Besides, as Lucius hinted, surely my status of as Longbottom Regent will persuade Rufus that we are not a cabal of Death Eaters." She paused and then

smirked ruefully. "Despite the fact that other than myself, the only other members to have *never* been a Death Eater are a pair of Slytherins both too young to have ever been offered the chance."

She sighed and tossed her napkin down on her empty plate. "As the saying goes, if t'were done well, it had best be done quickly. I'd must come up with an excuse for Neville to explain why I'm leaving him and Harry here alone on their first night back while I run off to treat with Scrimgeour."

Reg perked up at that. "Actually ... if you don't mind, I'll be picking up Harry and taking him directly to Grimmauld Place. I ... I think he should probably come see Sirius as soon as he gets home."

Augusta favored him with a sad look. "His condition is unchanged?"

"Unchanged, if not growing worse," he replied quietly.

She nodded gravely and left the room, leaving Regulus and Severus alone. The two sat in silence for several minutes. It was almost as though Severus were waiting for Regulus to make the first move, a step that Regulus dreaded taking. Finally, Regulus spoke cautiously while staring down at the table.

"You were right ... what you said about Sirius's health. His stupid little apparition stunt has undone all the treatment he's had since leaving Azkaban. Dobby's watching over him, but ... I don't think he's going to make it." He finally looked up at Severus's face. "Does that please you, Severus?" he asked and surprisingly without any anger or malice in the question.



Severus paused before answering. "Despite what I said yesterday, the prospect of your brother's death does not ... *necessarily* please me. I bear Sirius an intense ill will and if he were the only person affected, I would take no little satisfaction in his demise. But you have proven yourself a valuable member of our conspiracy and a staunch foe of the Dark Lord, and while we were never friends at school, you are still a fellow Slytherin. I am not so cold that I would wish upon you the grief of losing a sibling who had only just been returned to you. Just as I have no desire for Harry Potter to suffer the grief of losing a seemingly devoted godfather when his own father has been such a miserable failure on the role."

Then, his expression hardened. "But do not take my sympathy for your impending loss to mean I have any intention of averting it, even if such were within my power. I am not inclined to save the life of a man who tried to murder me." He sneered ruthlessly. "Particularly when he tried *again* to curse me just yesterday."

Regulus nodded. "I understand. I remember the lengths I went to in order to avenge my family's murder, Severus. I could never forgive any of the monsters responsible for it."

Snape tilted his head slightly. He had learned, of course, about Regulus's life as Lazarus White and the role a werewolf pack played in destroying it.

"So ... you believe me when I say that Sirius tried to murder me?"

Regulus hesitated and then nodded. "I didn't at first. But then, I asked him about it."

Snape's eyes widened in surprise. "And he *admitted* it?"

"No," Regus said flatly. "He said it was just a harmless prank that got out of hand." Then, he raised his hand to stall Snape's rising anger. "*But* I know my brother even after all these years. Let's just say I always thought the *real* reason he wasn't sorted into Slytherin was because he was the only Black in the history of our family to be *incapable* of lying properly. His '*denial*' all but confirmed your accusation."

He hesitated again. "For what it's worth, I also think he feels some degree of guilt over what happened, though I doubt he would ever admit it."

Snape snorted loudly, causing Regulus to wince slightly. After collecting himself, he began again.

'Severus, I *know* that in light of what Sirius did, regardless of the details which he has still not shared with me, I cannot possibly ask you to help my brother." He swallowed painfully. "So ... I'm going to *beg*. I will give you anything and everything in my power. I will swear whatever oaths you ask up to and including life-long servitude. I will give you every knut out of my vaults, and if I can manage it, all of Sirius's too. But please, *I beg you*, don't let my brother die."

Snape glared at the other Slytherin who truly seemed earnest and sincere in his plea. Despite himself, the Potion Master could not help but consider the matter. For as much as Snape *despised* Sirius Black, now that the offer had been made, saving him suddenly held a peculiar attraction. To earn the eternal devotion of both Regulus and Harry at Sirius's expense? And with the added bonus of acquiring much if not all of the Black wealth? And even an outside chance of the bastard *himself* owing Snape a life debt? The possibilities suddenly seemed intoxicating. And as he studied Regulus's earnest face, another possibility jumped to his mind.

"If I do this," he said slowly, "if I provide treatment for your brother, there is no guarantee that I can save him long term. At best, I can prepare a potions regimen to see him through the current health crisis. But if he continues to recklessly push himself before he fully recovers, he will only continue to relapse. And there is no guarantee that he will *ever* fully recover. Moreover, it will take me several hours at Hogwarts to even brew the potions needed. He may well expire before I can finish preparing them."

Despite the warning, Regulus nearly collapsed in relief. "Every hour he lives is another hour for me to hope, Severus, Thank you."

"Do not thank me *yet*, Regulus Black. You offered me quite a great many boons for saving your reprobate brother. The details we can work out later. But there is *one* thing you can – and *will* – do for me today."

Regulus swallowed tightly at the predatory gleam in Snape's eye and the cruel sneer on his lips.

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### ***The Dungeon***

#### ***Later that afternoon***

To Miss Demeanor's astonishment, she been blessed with several uninterrupted hours to study the magic that protected the cell door. Finally, she was ready to begin. Unfortunately, the next phase of her escape would be equally time-consuming and, worse, somewhat painful. She stalked across the room and snatched up the straitjacket in which she'd so recently been restrained and examined the metallic buckles. "*It'll have to do*," she decided with a frown.

Transfiguration was virtually impossible without a wand no matter how skilled the practitioner was. With very few exceptions, wandless magic was limited to Charms. But there were oh so many Charms that could be learned if one were patient enough to do so.

Or if one had been *created* with such familiarity.

Miss Demeanor grasped the metal buckle tightly and concentrated. "***TRANSVERTO NOVACULA***" she said softly, and in response, the metal of the buckle shimmered and flowed until it had become a small blade roughly the size and shape of a scalpel. She turned back to the door and laid herself down in front of it as near the frame as she thought safe. Then, she pulled back the sleeve of her prison shirt ... and gasped. Or was it Bellatrix Lestrange who had gasped inside her mind? Miss Demeanor honestly wasn't sure, as both of them were equally shocked. The Dark Mark was still there, blessedly reassuring in its permanence. But it was so ... *pale*. Gingerly, she touched the dread tattoo, and while she could feel the same vibrant magic that had been there since the day her master had inscribed it into her flesh, the sense of *connection*, the surety that her master was with her so long as she bore his mark, was gone.

The witch shook off her misgivings. The Dark Lord endured, she was sure of it. *Both* of her were sure of it. Setting aside her fears, she turned her arm over to show the side with unblemished skin. Then, she gritted her teeth tightly and made a small incision just deep enough to let the blood flow. After liberally coating both sides of the knife with her own life's blood, she began the painstaking process of gouging a rune into the floor, pausing every few minutes to dab the knife into the wound to replenish it. After a good ten minutes of careful work, she had inscribed the first and

simplest and yet most important rune: the lightning-shaped *Sowilo*.

She sighed as she wiped the blood from her arm and prepared to make a second cut. "*One down*," she thought. "*Forty-eight to go*."

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## **Kings Cross Station**

Platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$

4:30 p.m.

It had been a quiet train ride for Harry Potter. He was still upset about what had happened with Moody and later with Scrimgeour. The latter issue he'd discussed with Regulus for hours after returning to his dorm room, but he had not spoken to anyone about his invasion of Moody's privacy. He'd decided long before to never abuse his Occlumency gifts by preventing himself from feeling emotions except in dangerous situations that demanded that he have a clear mind. But while he'd previously allowed himself to feel anger, grief, and fear when necessary to maintain his mental health, this was the first time he'd forced himself to feel *shame*.

That cloud of emotions hung over Harry until the train pulled into Kings Cross Station. As he disembarked, he immediately saw Lady Augusta waiting for Neville and him, but he was surprised to see his solicitor, Artemus Podmore, standing next to her.

"Good afternoon, Harry!" Artie said with unusual energy. "I do apologize for showing up to spring this on you upon the start of the Christmas holidays, but there's been an important legal development that you and I need to address immediately. I must ask you to come with me. Lady Augusta

and I have already discussed the matter, so I'll Apparate us straight to Gringotts and then return you to Longbottom Manor this evening."

Harry studied his solicitor with some confusion, as his passive Legilimency told him that something was *off* about the man. The question was answered when "Artie" leaned in to whisper "*Time is of the essence, I'm afraid.*" And as he spoke, one of the man's eyes shifted color from brown to the icy grey that Harry had learned to associate with the House of Black. He nodded in understanding, before turning to Neville.

"I don't know how long this will take, so I guess you'd best start dinner without me. I'll see you when I see you, I guess." The two boys exchanged a brotherly hug before Harry and "Artie" popped away.

A long vertiginous moment later, Harry and Artie were standing in the foyer of Grimmauld Place, where Artie quickly shifted into the familiar face of Regulus Black, his clothing immediately sagging on his smaller frame.

"What's going on?" Harry asked cautiously. Regulus rubbed his hand over his face and then quickly explained the current situation – that Sirius had suffered a bad relapse and that if Snape couldn't provide suitable healing remedies, he might not make it through the night.

"I thought Sirius was getting better," Harry said anxiously.

"He was, but .... Do you remember how you reacted to the Boggart last year when your brother exposed you to it directly?"

Harry nodded guardedly.

"Well, the principle's the same. Wizards and witches are often much more vulnerable to things like post-traumatic stress than Muggles are. For them, it's a purely psychological problem. But for us, when circumstances cause us to remember deeply traumatic events, our own magic can sometimes turn against us and *recreate* the physiological symptoms that originally accompanied those events. In your case, being exposed to a Boggart caused your body to experience the symptoms of a doxy attack. Similarly, Sirius's ill-advised Apparition attempt, combined with a form of claustrophobia developed over the length of his incarceration, caused his body to experience the effects of several years of malnourishment, mistreatment, and Dementor exposure all at once."

"All that just from Apparating?" Harry asked incredulously.

Regulus shrugged. "It's part of the nature of Apparition travel, I'm afraid. People who have any degree of claustrophobia often suffer panic attacks from traveling that way, at least until they grow more comfortable with it."

Harry said nothing else as he followed Regulus deeper into the house, but he wondered to himself if his own background might present a similar problem when it came time to learn how to Apparate on his own. He'd never thought of himself as claustrophobic, but he was suddenly worried about whether solo Apparition might dredge up memories of years spent trapped in a cupboard. Then, he was distracted from such musings by the *whoosh* of the nearby Floo. Professor Snape had arrived with a black healer's bag in tow.

"Severus," Regulus exclaimed. "Thank you so much for coming! You don't know how grateful ...."

"Enough, Regulus!" the other man snapped. "I'm here. Your maudlin displays of gratitude will do nothing further save set my teeth on edge." He looked around the room. "I don't suppose anyone else is available to help us, perchance. Specifically, someone who knows the Patronus Charm. The more Patronuses active around your brother, the easier it will be for him to throw off the psychic trauma of his Dementor exposure. I would have brought Flint, but he's teaching Patronus lessons at Hogwarts today."

"I can do the mist form," Harry offered.

Snape sneered at the boy. "I'm well aware of your precociousness, Potter, but you're not at Hogwarts now, and so the Trace will record your use of magic and your location when you cast it."

Harry opened his mouth to respond and closed it. His expression indicated that he wanted to say something but was choking on the words. Snape closed his eyes.

"*Merlin grant me the strength to persevere*," he muttered under his breath before opening his eyes to glare in accusation at Regulus. "You lawless reprobates have somehow managed to illegally remove the Trace from a thirteen-year-old boy, haven't you!"

"No!" Regulus said defensively. "We just gave him a wand that the Trace can't detect."

Snape sighed loudly. "Go get your incredibly illegal wand, Potter. We have work to do."

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***Longbottom Manor***  
***Roughly the same time ...***



With a soft pop, Augusta and Neville appeared on the front steps of Longbottom Manor to find the Longbottom house elves – Hoskins and Lumpen – waiting for them.

"Welcome back, sir," said Hoskins cheerfully. "Did Master Neville have an enjoyable term at school?"

"Well, I don't know about *enjoyable*," Neville said, "but I made it through unscathed, I reckon." He turned his attention to Lumpen, who oversaw the gardens and greenhouses on the Manor property and had done so since the time of Neville's great-grandfather. While Neville had never made a study of house elf geriatrics, Lumpen was the oldest house elf in Wizarding Britain that Neville knew of. Sadly, it showed, to the point that the elf was no longer permitted to handle any household affairs outside of gardening, the only arena where his memory and capabilities had not yet begun to fail.

"Lumpen!" Neville said rather loudly, for the diminutive creature was known to be hard of hearing. "How's my *Mimulus mimbletonia* coming along?"

It was near the end of the previous summer when Neville had decided to undertake the difficult process of raising a specimen of the incredibly demanding plant. The boy's Uncle Algie had been the only Longbottom to successfully breed one in decades, but he'd waited until completing a Herbology NEWT to even attempt it. Neville had chosen to plant one before he'd even taken an OWL, and he'd researched on a treatment plan that Lumpen could carry out while he was at school.

The elf nodded and grinned. "Quite well, sir. Quite well indeed. Lumpen reckons it will be ready for first germination next summer, Master Frank."

Neville and Augusta both grimaced at that, while Hoskins leaned over to Lumpen and coughed the words "*Master Neville*" under his breath. Lumpen looked around in surprise before babbling a brief apology and using Neville's proper name.

"That's quite alright," Neville said sadly. "I'll come by to look at it first thing in the morning. I'm sure you've done a wonderful job with it and with all the rest of the hothouse plants."

Lumpen smiled warmly at the compliment. Meanwhile, with a snap of his fingers, Hoskins transported Neville's trunk up to his room while the boy and his grandmother entered the Manor.

"Are you hungry, Neville?" Augusta asked.

"Not especially, Gran."

"Good, because unfortunately, dinner won't be until 8 o'clock. I do hate to leave you alone on your first night back, but unfortunately, some business matters have popped up unexpectedly, and I must pop down to the farm in Wales to attend to them."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, Neville, that won't be necessary. It doesn't involve anything to do with the running of the farm itself. It's just some tedious contractual work. Just stay here and relax. If you get peckish before dinner is served, Hoskins can make you a snack."

Then, she pulled the boy into a warm hug. "I'm glad you're home, Neville."

"Me too, Gran," he answered before heading up to his room. After he was gone, Augusta called for Hopkins.

"Yes, Milady?"

Augusta spoke quietly, as if afraid Neville might overhear. "In all the excitement of the day, I completely forgot about our '*guests*.' Have you perchance checked in on Bellatrix Lestrangle? I know she's bound and incapacitated, but she's still conscious."

Once again, Augusta cursed the fact that someone who'd been awoken from Draught of Living Death could not be placed back under it for at least a week. She consoled herself with the knowledge that they'd gotten nearly all the information from the three Lestranges that could be gained, which meant that justification for keep the three Death Eaters alive was nearly at an end.

The house elf coughed nervously. "Hoskins has not *personally* viewed the prisoners, Milady. But all the wards in the dungeon are intact and untouched. Hoskins can tell nothing more without physically entering the prisoner's cell."

Augusta nodded. "When Neville is settled in, do so." She paused and her expression hardened. "You are authorized to use whatever force is necessary to restrain the Lestrangle bitch if she shows any signs of resistance or any remote possibility of escape. Even lethal force."

Hoskins said nothing, but his respectful bow made it clear the order was understood.

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***Grimmauld Place***  
***Sirius's Bedroom***

Slowly and painfully, Sirius Black's eyes fluttered open, and he looked around the room with some surprise. His bedroom seemed thick with a silvery fog, and for a few seconds, there were two Patronuses – a silvery doe and a strange canine animal – standing on either side of his bed before they slowly faded away. Regulus and Harry both stood at the foot of the large canopy bed, their faces etched with concern. He smiled weakly at them both, but it turned into a frown when he saw someone else sitting farther behind them in a chair against the far wall: Severus Snape.

*"What -cough- what is he d-doing here?"* Sirius spat out angrily. As he sputtered, the animagus sat up in bed and snatched up the wand that had been resting on his nightstand. Instantly, Regulus interposed himself between his brother and Snape before Sirius could do something foolish. Beside him, Harry involuntarily took a step back and clutched the Black Wand tightly in his hand.

Regulus held up his arms and tried to calm Sirius. "Brother, Professor Snape is here because he just helped save your life. You ... injured yourself gravely when you attempted to apparate inside Longbottom Manor. You might well have died had Snape not provided you with medical treatment."

*"... should've let me die,"* he muttered.

"Sirius!" Regulus exclaimed, while Harry's eyes widened in shock. He already knew about Snape's hatred for his godfather, but this was the first chance he'd had to see how thoroughly it was reciprocated. For his part, Snape only snorted contemptuously.

"Believe me, Black," he said. "That was my original intention. Certainly, your continued existence is not merely personally offensive to me, it is also a blight on the whole of

creation." Then, Snape smirked. "Luckily for you, your brother agreed to give me something ... *irresistible* to secure my aid in preserving your miserable existence."

"Do we really need to do this *now*, Severus?" Regulus asked irritably. "Sirius has only just regained consciousness!"

Snape said nothing, but his expression was implacable. Meanwhile, Sirius's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"What did you offer this Death Eater, Regulus?" he said in an icy voice.

Regulus glared at Snape. Then, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath to prepare himself for whatever came next.

"I asked you once before about Severus's accusation against you – that you tried to kill him."

Sirius's lip curled in disgust. "And I told you to drop it!"

"Yes, you did." Then, Reg opened his eyes and regarded his brother. "*However*, as a condition to helping you, Severus ... Severus made me swear an Unbreakable Vow that I would get you to reveal the *truth* about that incident before this day was over."

Sirius stared at Regulus in shock, and even Harry was surprised by what he'd heard. While Snape was apparently under an oath never to reveal what had happened during the mysterious Prank, it now appeared Sirius would have to divulge that secret unless he wanted his younger brother to lose his magic and possibly his life. Sirius turned a furious gaze towards Snape, whose face was an emotionless mask.

"You utter bastard!" he snarled. "James should have let you die!"

"Ah, but I would not have been the only one, would I, Black?" Snape replied. "Tell your brother the truth. About how you tried to kill me. And about *who you were willing to sacrifice* in order to commit that murder!"

"Damn you, *Snivellus!*" Sirius roared and tried to rise from his bed, but Regulus interrupted before he could continue.

"Sirius! I know we would love nothing more than to watch you rant and rave at Snape for hours and hours, but I've *explained* the situation. So, are you going to tell me the *truth*? Or should I leave now and start making my funeral arrangements?"

Sirius nearly quivered in rage, before he finally fell back onto his pillow.

"Alright. But I can't believe you were willing to swear an Unbreakable Vow over something like this. I'd have thought a Slytherin would be smarter." Sirius took a moment to collect himself before he began his tale.

"It was in the Fall of 1976," he began. "Around Halloween. You know there were four of us Gryffindors who stuck together. The Marauders we called ourselves. Me, James, Peter ... and Remus."

Regulus nodded. "I remember."

"Well, something you didn't know about us - because *no one* knew outside of the four of us, Dumbledore, and Pomfrey - was that Remus ... was a werewolf."

At that point, Sirius flinched in response to the look Regulus gave him.

"... that's ... impossible," Reg said slowly after a disturbingly long pause. "Dumbledore ... he would never ... *a werewolf*?!"

"You have to understand, Reg," Sirius said urgently. "Moony wasn't like other werewolves. He turned when the moon was full like werewolves do, but he never lost his sanity or became a psychopath like we were taught in DADA. Except on the night of the full moon, he was as sane as me."

"... Moony?" Harry asked slowly.

"Yeah," Sirius answered as if happy to look at someone other than his brother. "That was what we called him. Remus was Moony, I was Padfoot, your dad was Prongs, and well, you know the other one."

"So, the werewolf allowed to attend Hogwarts along with us all was called ... Moony," Reg said in a slightly strangled voice. "Of course he was. I'm sure you Gryffindors thought it was all jolly good fun to have a werewolf roommate."

"Reg ...." Sirius began nervously, but his brother quickly interrupted him.

"Go on, Sirius," he said in a raspy voice. "You were going to tell us about the 'Prank' you played on Severus that apparently involved a werewolf."

Sirius swallowed. "When it was time for Remus to change, he would go to the Shrieking Shack, which was a place at the edge of Hogsmeade that Dumbledore set up for him. There was a tunnel that connected it to a secret passage under the Whomping Willow." He glared over towards Snape, who smirked cruelly at his discomfort.

"Anyway, *Snivellus* was always trying to get us into trouble. That is, when he wasn't getting his kicks supplying dark curses to future Death Eaters! On the day in question, he came upon me just after..." Sirius hesitated. "Well, he came upon me when I was upset about something else that had happened that day and started pestering me about where Remus went off to on the night of every full moon. I lost my temper and told him the secret of how to get past the Whomping Willow."

"It was stupid of me to tell him, but I never *dreamed* he'd be such an absolute moron as to actually *go* to the Shrieking Shack! Later on, I told James about it, and he ended up saving the little creep's miserable life. Honestly, my only regret is that I thoughtlessly endangered Remus's life, since he'd have probably been killed if he'd attacked Snivellus while transformed. But making Snivellus piss his pants at the sight of a werewolf? No great loss there."

He laughed at that, but the smile faded away when he saw Regulus's expression.

"No ... great ... loss," he said slowly. "Tell me, Sirius. Have you ever seen the carnage left behind after a werewolf attack?"

"Reg..."

"No, let me *rephrase* that, *Brother*! Do you have *any idea* what it's like to have someone you love *DIE IN YOUR ARMS* after she'd been *gutted* by a werewolf? DO YOU?! Can you imagine what it's like to ... to walk into your infant son's nursery and ... and....!"

At that, Regulus's face crumpled as the emotions he'd thought buried at last rushed forward to engulf him. As tears rolled down his cheek, he practically ran for the door.



"Regulus, listen to me, dammit!" Sirius called out.

"NO, SIRIUS! I DO NOT WANT TO LISTEN TO YOU! RIGHT NOW, I DON'T WANT TO KNOW THAT YOU EXIST!" He clutched the door frame as if suddenly dizzy.

"I JUST WANT TO GET OUT OF THIS ... MAUSOLEUM THAT I NEVER SHOULD HAVE COME BACK TO! AND I WANT TO GO GET STINKING DRUNK SOMEWHERE AND TRY TO REMEMBER WHY THE HELL I THOUGHT IT WAS A GOOD IDEA *TO SAVE YOUR MISERABLE HIDE FROM AZKABAN!*"

Harry looked aghast, and even Snape was shaken. He'd intended on using the truth about The Prank to drive a wedge between the two Black brothers, but he had not even considered how traumatic the loss of his family had been to Regulus. Though his face remained impassive, on the inside, Snape suddenly felt quite guilty.

"Regulus!" Sirius exclaimed. "Please, just wait!" The younger man turned to glare at him, and Sirius was taken aback the look of contempt in Regulus's eyes.

"And you want to know the funny part, Sirius?" he said viciously. "After all these years, it turns out that you finally did do something *that would have made Mother proud of you!*"

And with that last cutting remark, Regulus Black fled from Grimmauld Place. As soon as he was gone, Sirius turned on Snape in a fury.

"You unspeakable ... *snake!* How could you be so ... *evil* as to make Regulus swear that Unbreakable Vow?!"

Snape barked out a laugh as he rose from his chair and advanced towards his old enemy. "Evil, Black? Honestly, you don't have the slightest clue how Slytherins think, do you? And certainly no idea how your own brother thinks! I *didn't* make Regulus swear an Unbreakable Vow! I simply made him swear on the honor of House Black and House Slytherin that he would get you to tell him the truth. And while those two things mean nothing to you, I assure you they mean a great deal to him. So much so that he *lied to your face* about an Unbreakable Vow because he knew that his very life being on the line would be the only thing that could get you to tell the truth!"

"YOU DEATH EATER FILTH!" Sirius bellowed as he fired off a curse at Snape who parried it before returning fire. Harry immediately dove for cover, while Sirius threw himself off the bed to dodge one of Snape's curses. One stray spell actually set the nearby window curtains on fire, and Harry ran over to cast the Fire Suppression Charm before the whole house went ablaze. Then, he had to duck as a ricocheting curse flew over his head and left a giant scorch mark on the wall. Several more soon followed.

"STOP THIS! BOTH OF YOU!" Harry yelled, but the two men, so consumed with a lifetime of hatred for one another, ignored his plea, their curses growing ever more dangerous and destructive. Finally, something in Harry snapped.

**"EXPELLIARMUS DUO!"**

Neither wizard had been paying any attention to the boy, and so neither was prepared for a Disarming Hex that struck them both simultaneously. Snape and Sirius's wands flew from each of their grasps and unerringly made their way to Harry's outstretched hand. For a moment, there was a shocked silence from all three wizards. For his part, Harry

was horrified that with one spell cast on pure instinct, he'd disarmed both his godfather and his Head of House, the two people best positioned to punish him in horrific ways for the transgression. And from the matching looks of utter fury on their faces, he felt quite certain that horrific punishments from both of them would definitely be forthcoming.

But then, Harry once more felt the strange *whirr-click* sensation, as the Legilimency kaleidoscope in Harry's head rotated to provide a clear insight. Harry *knew* what he needed to do – knew and was terrified by the knowledge.

*"If I do this and it doesn't work," he thought to himself, "they will probably race one another to see who hexes me first."*

But then, both Snape and Sirius started moving in his direction, and the moment of hesitation ended. Harry turned and ran out of the bedroom, pulling it shut behind him. Before the other two wizards could reach the door, they could both hear the spell that Harry cast from the other side.

**"*COLLOPORTUS TRIMENDIUM!*"** And in a flash, chains appeared that barred the door and windows shut.

"Harry!" Sirius cried out. "What the hell do you think you're doing?! Open this door at once!"

"Potter!" Snape bellowed just as loudly. "You will release us and return our wands at once or you will be scrubbing cauldrons until the day you die!"

Outside the door, Harry looked around wildly as he listened to the two outraged wizards expound at length on how he'd be punished for this betrayal. Finally, he called out to the one being who could help him right now.

"DOOBBBBBYYYY!"

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### ***The Longbottom Dungeon***

Miss Demeanor had just begun her 37th runic inscription when she froze at the sound of a soft pop from somewhere outside her cell. With an eerie stealth, she crawled silently to the corner of the room to the left of the door. Then, she turned towards the opposite wall where the remains of her straitjacket lay on the floor. She gestured and whispered the incantation for the Doppelganger Defense Charm, and in response, an illusory copy of her shimmered into view, seemingly unconscious and wearing the straitjacket that she'd removed hours earlier. The witch frowned. The spell was one of the most difficult of those Charms that she could cast without a wand, and worse, she was exhausted and had lost much blood. Consequently, her double was not nearly as realistic as she'd have wanted, and in any case, it would only last for a few seconds.

Immediately, there was a soft grating sound as a metal plate on the door slid open to allow someone to view inside. Miss Demeanor held her breath, grateful beyond measure that for once, Bellatrix Lestrange had shown the good sense to stay silent. After a few seconds, there was another pop, and Hoskins appeared in the middle of the cell within a few feet of the illusion. He studied the false Bellatrix for several seconds in obvious confusion. Then, the elf stiffened in fear and turned around ... but it was already too late. By the time Hoskins realized the danger, Miss Demeanor had lashed out with a leg and kicked him hard enough to send him flying across the cell and into a wall.

Stunned, Hoskins shook his head in a desperate attempt to get his bearings. He raised his hand to snap his fingers, but

before he could, Miss Demeanor landed on his hand with enough force to break several knuckles. Hoskins howled in pain, but his cries were silenced as the Death Eater crouched down and repeatedly punched his face until he stopped moving.

"*Is it dead?*" asked Bellatrix excitedly.

"*No, not yet,*" Miss Demeanor answered.

"*Well why not?! Kill it! Kill it! KILL IT!*"

Miss Demeanor rolled her psychic eyes at her counterpart. "*Why what a splendid idea, Bellatrix! We'll kill the unconscious house elf and instantly alert its owner, who undoubtedly sent it to check on us, that it is dead! I'm sure that will do wonders for our escape attempt!*"

Bellatrix said nothing but did growl softly.

"*Besides,*" Miss Demeanor added cruelly. "*House elf blood is inherently magical. And why should we use our own blood when we've acquired a fresh volunteer!*"

At that, Bellatrix's surliness melted away, and she suddenly giggled like a schoolgirl. Miss Demeanor needed more time to finish the ward scheme that would allow them both to escape. But as Bellatrix surveyed the beaten elf at their feet and felt the cool surety of the knife in Miss Demeanor's hand, she was comforted to know that she would at least have something to entertain her while she waited.

# The Blackest Day Pt 2

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### ***CHAPTER 29: The Blackest Day Pt 2 (Best Enemies)***

#### **12 Grimmauld Place**

#### **Master Bedroom**

**5:30 p.m.**

"***COLLOPORTUS TRIMENDIUM!***" Harry yelled from outside the bedroom door, and before either Sirius or Snape could react, chains magically appeared to seal them in with what Snape knew to be one of the strongest locking charms he'd ever encountered. Behind them, there was another rattling sound that indicated that the ward extended to the room's windows as well.

"Harry!" Sirius bellowed. He strode towards the door with the intent of pounding on it with his fists, but he immediately jerked his hand back when the ward shocked him harmlessly but still painfully. Undeterred, he tried yelling louder. "Harry! Open this door at once!"

Snape snorted contemptuously. "Cease your bellowing, you cretin! That charm muffles sound among its other properties - not that the boy is likely to free us anyway if he thinks you're furious at his actions. And in addition to electrifying the door and windows, it also protects them against physical damage. Without a wand, it is impossible to break through."

"You!" Sirius said furiously as he turned from the door towards his old rival. "You're responsible for this! Somehow

you turned Harry against me! Just like you did with Reg!"

"If only that were true," Snape scoffed. "Alas, Harry has ignored all my warnings about what a wretched swine you are. As for your brother, given his own personal history, it was inevitable that he would be disgusted with you once he inevitably learned what you did to me."

He smirked cruelly. "Honestly, I think I did him a favor."

With a strangled roar, Sirius launched himself at Snape, leading to a brief physical struggle between them. It was not an impressive battle. Both men were recuperating from serious physical traumas, and Snape, while deadly with a wand, had little experience with fisticuffs. As for Sirius, unarmed combat had not been a part of his Auror training, and after over a decade in Azkaban, his skills had not progressed far beyond the level of schoolyard brawls. A Muggle onlooker might have described it as more of a "slap fight" than real combat.

After less than a minute of ineffectual efforts to hurt one another, Snape finally shoved Sirius hard enough for him to collapse onto the bed before falling himself into an easy chair.

"Enough!" he gasped. "This ... *hooliganism* is ridiculous! We are wizards! We should act like it!" He took a few seconds to catch his breath. "For now, Black, let us agree to concentrate on getting out of here and recovering our wands. And then, I will be only too happy to duel you properly."

Sirius wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Agreed," he muttered reluctantly. "So how do we do that? Can you apparate out of here?"

"Not without a wand, obviously," Severus sneered. "And before you ask, the same holds true for portkeys."

"I *know* that," Sirius said through gritted teeth. "What about runes? We took NEWT-level Ancient Runes together, didn't we?"

"Yes," Snape said hesitantly. "I received an O, but that was fifteen years ago. I ... have spent little time studying runes since then. You? It was a prerequisite for the Auror Academy, yes?"

"Yeah, but you may recall something about me spending twelve years in Azkaban, where I didn't have much chance to practice. Getting caught doing rune work was presumed to be an escape attempt and punished with an automatic Kiss."

Snape shrugged as if unconcerned with Black's suffering.

"*And also, I only got an EE,*" Sirius muttered under his breath.

"Then our way is regrettably clear – we must wait here until your godson comes to his senses and frees us or until your brother calms down and does the same. Unless there is someone else who might come to our rescue?"

That last question was seemingly answered when Dobby materialized on top of a nearby side table, startling both men. He was bearing a silver tray holding two glasses and two bottles of Ogden's Finest that he gently placed on the table before addressing the two wizards.

"Begging your pardon, sirs, but at the Great Master Harry's direction, I have brought some liquid refreshment for you to



enjoy while the two of you talk out your differences and disagreements."

"... WHAT!?" Sirius spluttered. "Talk about our ...?! Has he gone mental!" For his part, Snape was literally speechless at the house elf's words. Sirius angrily jabbed a finger in Dobby's direction.

"Now you listen to me, Dobby! I want you to deactivate that ward right now."

Dobby shook his head with condescending sadness. "Dobby regrets that he cannot comply, sirs."

"Alright," said Snape. "Bring us our wands then."

The elf shook his head again. "Master Harry wishes for you two gentle-wizards to resolve your interpersonal conflict lest it undermine the mission to defeat He Who Must Not Be Named, sirs. Dobby is ... *committed* to his Master's wishes."

"Dobby, I *order* you...!" Sirius began but was interrupted.

"Dobby apologizes, good sir," he said politely but firmly, "but Dobby belongs to the Great and Wonderful Harry Potter, not the House of Black. Dobby is not bound to obey orders which conflict with those from Dobby's master,"

"Surely you have other elves, do you not?" Snape said.

Sirius grumbled a bit at the thought of calling on his family's house elf, but he saw no other options.

"Kreacher! *Kreacher!*"

There was no response. Both men turned to Dobby who looked slightly embarrassed but completely unrepentant.

"Dobby did anticipate that Lord Black might call upon the Kreacher elf. And so, Dobby *distracted* the Kreacher elf by presenting him with a bottle of butterbeer."

"Rubbish!" Sirius exclaimed. "Kreacher is bound to me no matter how much he might hate it! He *must* come when summoned, even if he's ... *intoxicated!* *KREACHER!*"

Dobby coughed diplomatically into his fist. "To be more specific, Lord Black. Dobby presented the bottle in question *forcefully to the back of the Kreacher elf's head.*"

The two men looked at each other in astonishment as Dobby bowed deeply and then popped away.

"That is without a doubt the strangest house elf I've ever met," Sirius finally said. Snape could only nod in agreement.

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After Dobby's departure, the two men surprisingly did not resume their argument but instead fell into an uncomfortable silence. Snape spent time examining the room for secret doors even though intellectually, he knew that the Colloportus Trimendium would have sealed any such exits. Meanwhile, Sirius finally broke down and opened a bottle of Ogden's to pour himself a drink, an act that caused Snape's lip to curl in disgust. Eventually, after nearly half an hour of sullen and mutual silence, Sirius finally spoke aloud.

"I cannot *believe* Harry would do something like this," he muttered to himself in frustration.

"We both have strong relationships with him," Snape answered without looking in his direction. "I am his teacher, his Occlumency mentor, and his Head of House. And, presumably due to a moment of insanity on Lily's part, you are his godfather. Given his background, I assume the boy became upset when you attacked me, and, out of a childish desire for his two surrogate father figures to" – for a moment, Snape looked ill – "*become friends*, he foolishly took this course of action. Grossly inappropriate for a Slytherin, but understandable, I suppose."

"What do you mean '*given his background*'?" Sirius asked suspiciously. Then, his brain caught up with the rest of what Snape said. "Hang on! '*I attacked you*'? Are you actually blaming *me* for this?"

"You *did* fire the first spell, Black," Snape said acidly. "As was usually the case throughout most of our school years. Or has Azkaban left you so feeble-minded that you've already forgotten events from within the last hour?"

"Hippogriff shit! I may have fired the first spell, *Snivellus*, but *you* started it. You intentionally manipulated Reg into forcing me to tell him about The Prank with *the goal* of upsetting him and turning against me!"

Snape stared at his nemesis in astonishment. "You utter hypocrite! You blame me for revealing to your brother the truth about what you did when you know his wife and child were massacred by werewolves! Did you think Regulus would *never* find out?!"

Sirius opened his mouth to respond, but Snape cut him off angrily before he could get a word out.

"And *another thing*! *How dare you* continue to refer to your attempt to kill me as ... *The Prank*! Are you truly such a

sociopath that even now you think it was just another '*Marauder joke*'?! Even Sainted James Potter had the decency to recognize the gravity of what nearly happened, even if he was crass enough to assert a life debt over it!"

"Just stop with your miserable whining!" the Marauder snapped. "You knew what you were getting into! And if you were so stupid as to knowingly confront a werewolf on the night of the full moon, then you deserved what you got! Which, by the way, was nothing more than getting scared a bit before James saved you!"

Snape did a double-take. "Knew ... what I was ... GETTING INTO?! You psychotic cretin, *I had no idea that Lupin was a werewolf until he tried to BITE MY HEAD OFF!*"

Black sneered in contempt. "Oh, and now you want to lie to my face so you can pretend to be the innocent! You knew perfectly well that Moony was a werewolf! That's why you sought him out at the Shrieking Shack! To expose him and get him kicked out of school, if not *put down like a rabid dog!*"

Snape looked at the other man as if he were an idiot.

"Then answer me this, Black," he hissed in barely contained fury. "*How could I have possibly known that Lupin was a werewolf?* Other than disappearing once a month around the full moon, he showed *none* of the symptoms – symptoms which are *obvious* to anyone who completed a Third Year DADA course. As much contempt as I had for Dumbledore's sentimentality in those days, not even I would have believed him capable of housing a potential cannibal-killer in a school full of children."

Sirius sat up in bed and snarled at the other man. "Well if you didn't think Remus was a werewolf, then *WHY THE*

*HELL DID YOU WANT TO KNOW WHY HE WENT TO THE SHRIEKING SHACK EVERY FULL MOON?!"*

"BECAUSE, *YOU IMBECILE*, I THOUGHT THAT WAS WHERE YOU MARAUDERS WENT TO BREW THAT ILLEGAL HOMEMADE FIREWHISKY THAT YOU'D BEEN SELLING TO THE LOWER YEARS! I KNOW IT HAS A MONTHLY BREWING CYCLE! *THAT WAS WHAT I PLANNED TO USE TO GET YOU MARAUDERS INTO TROUBLE AND HOPEFULLY EXPELLED!*"

"DON'T BE SO *STUPID!* WE BREWED THE FIREWHISKY IN A BROOM CLOSET IN GRYFFINDOR TOWER!"

With that, the two men abruptly ceased yelling at one another, and a silence fell, broken only by the sound of their heavy breathing. Finally, Sirius spoke again, haltingly and quietly.

"You ... you really didn't know about Moony? You thought he was going out every month ... *to brew firewhisky?*"

Snape looked away in annoyance, which was answer enough. After a few seconds, the quiet was broken by a sudden snort from Sirius, followed, to Snape's annoyance, by several seconds of barely contained giggling. Soon, Sirius was laughing out loud.

"Heehee ... you didn't ... heehee ... even *know!* HAHAHA!"

Snape's anger at Black's reaction continued to grow ... until the man's delirious laughter turned into increasingly desperate wheezes as he became unable to breathe. Snape glared at the man before eventually shaking his head contemptuously. Then, he reached over to the bedside table for a Calming Draught that he tried to force down Sirius's throat

"*Wha ... what ... can't breathe! Can't ...!*" By this point, there were tears in Black's eyes, and his face had gone pale.

"Just shut up and drink the damned potion, Black!" Snape growled. "As much as I despise you, I have no wish to have your godson and brother come back and find me standing over your cold, stiffened corpse. They *might* get the wrong impression."

Sirius allowed his enemy to pour the Calming Draught down his throat. His breathing soon calmed, and he closed his eyes as if falling asleep. Snape sat back down and looked around the room for a clock – it felt as though he'd been trapped with his old enemy for days. Silence reigned between the two men for several minutes. Then, just as Snape thought Black had fallen asleep, the other man spoke in a soft voice without opening his eyes.

"I tried to murder you."

Snape turned sharply. "What did you say?"

"I said: *I tried to murder you.*"

The Slytherin snorted. "I know that, Black. I've only been saying that for over ...."

"No, Snape," Black interrupted as he opened his eyes and peered deeply into those of his enemy. "This is my confession. This is the truth. I tried to murder you. It wasn't a prank that went wrong. I wanted you dead."

Snape opened his mouth to speak but suddenly couldn't think of a reply.

"Do you remember what day it was when I told you about the Whomping Willow, Snape?"

Snape stiffened. "Of course, I do. I will never forget that ...."

"It was the day we learned that Marlene McKinnon's mum and dad had been murdered by Death Eaters."

*That* comment silenced Snape at once. He *did* know what had happened to Malcolm and Lena McKinnon, but until this moment, it had not occurred to him to connect that tragedy with the morning of his werewolf encounter. *Everyone* in Slytherin knew what had happened to the McKinnons. Or at least what had *supposedly* happened. The description of their brutal torture and murder that appeared in the *Daily Prophet* was so gory and lurid that those Slytherins who supported the Dark Lord (including a young Regulus Black) insisted that it was a lie, nothing but government propaganda meant to slander Voldemort's pro-Pureblood movement.

Sirius leaned back and stared blankly up at the ceiling as he continued his tale.

"I first met Marlene McKinnon when we were both Sorted into Gryffindor. We hated each other at first, of course. At the age of 11, I couldn't understand why *anyone* wouldn't instantly be starstruck by how *awesome* I was, while she couldn't figure out how I could get through doors with a head as big as I had. Then, in Second Year, James played a prank on her – turned her hair purple or something. She didn't run to a teacher or even plot a revenge prank. She just calmly walked up to James ... and *punched* him so hard he got a black eye. Then, when the Head Boy told her she had three hours of detention, she just asked him – in front of the entire Gryffindor Tower – whether she could take six

hours of detention instead in exchange for giving James *another* Black eye. I think that was when I started to fall in love with her."

He glanced over at Snape who seemed transfixed by Black's story and even more so by the oddly broken tone in which he shared it.

"Don't get me wrong. The Marauders were my best friends, and James was my brother in all but blood. But I could still laugh when one of us got taken down deservedly."

Snape gaped at that, and Sirius winced. They both knew how Sirius reacted when it was *Snape* who "*took down*" James Potter.

"Yeah, yeah. I know what you're thinking, and you're right. My problem back then was recognizing *when* we deserved to get taken down and *by whom*. Pride blinds you to things like that, especially when you're a stupid, arrogant kid."

The Slytherin almost made a sarcastic comment but decided against it.

"When we were in Fourth Year, Marlene made it onto the Quidditch team ... beating *me* out for a Chaser position in the process. I ended up as a Beater instead. She asked me after the tryouts if I was mad at her. I told her I was *furious*, but I'd forgive her if she went with me to a Hogsmeade weekend. We dated from then until ...."

Sirius paused and shook his head.

"I'm getting ahead of myself. In 1975, I told my folks I'd be staying at Hogwarts over Christmas and then snuck off to James's house for the holidays. Mother found out, of course, but only after the break was over, so she didn't get to cane



me for it until the next summer. But the important bit was that the McKinnons came to the Potter New Year's Ball which was a big social event even then. Marlene introduced me to her mum and dad. Such wonderful people. Malcolm was Head of a Noble House and an advocate for Muggleborn rights. Lena was a Senior Auror. Both were proud to be called enemies of You Know Who. And it was pretty obvious that they weren't fond of the House of Black, either. But that didn't stop them from giving me a chance. We talked for over an hour while sipping punch and ignoring the rest of the party. At midnight, we all sang *Auld Lang Syne* together. And as they were leaving, Malcolm shook my hand and Lena hugged me. They both asked me to write to them regularly, something my own parents never did. My family lineage was never raised as an issue by either of the McKinnons again."

"The summer after my Fifth Year, my mother ...." Sirius paused in his account and swallowed painfully. He looked away for a few seconds before collecting himself. "The summer after my Fifth Year, I ran away from home to live with the Potters. I wouldn't see this place again until Reg brought me here after springing me from Azkaban." He took a deep breath. "I went to the Potters because I considered James my brother. But if they'd rejected me - or hell, if they'd just not been home that night - I'd have gone to the McKinnons instead. Lena had invited me at one point. Said that if ...."

He stopped, once again overcome by emotion, and then he wiped at his eyes before continuing.

"They said that if things became intolerable with my parents, they would be proud to take me in. I was so grateful for that. But I was also grateful that it wasn't necessary. James was my brother, but I didn't want to look

on Marlene as ... my sister." He barked out a laugh.

"Growing up with my parents, that's the *last* way I wanted to view someone I already wanted to marry at the age of 15. Later that summer, while on a date with Marlene at Diagon Alley, I proposed to her over a bowl of Fortescue's ice cream. She said yes. She insisted that we wouldn't get married until graduation, of course. And also that we not tell anyone until after I'd formally asked Malcolm for her hand at Christmas. But Marlene said yes. I even gave her a ring. It wasn't real, of course. After I got wiped off the family tree, I was flat broke, and I didn't want to borrow from the Potters. They'd already given me so much. So, I stole a spoon from Fortescue's and transfigured it into the fanciest promise ring I could make. I'd never been so happy as when I saw the look on her face as she put it on."

He closed his eyes tightly, and a single tear rolled down his cheek. Then, his lips curled up into an animalistic snarl.

"Four months later, Malcolm and Lena were dead! And not *just* dead! The bastards tortured them for *hours* before finally killing them! It was *sick* the things they did to two of the nicest people I'd ever known just for standing up to the Dark Bastard!"

Snape licked his lips. He had never in his wildest dreams imagined this degree of raw honesty from a Marauder. And part of him was afraid of where Black's revelations would lead.

"Marlene came to me in tears. Those wretched muckrakers who ran the *Daily Prophet* got hold of an Auror's report and revealed every sickening detail. Believe it or not, that was how she found out – by reading it in the newspaper before anyone from the Ministry even bothered to send word. The *Prophet* even ran *pictures*. Marlene was almost

hysterical. I tried to hold her, but she pushed me back. Then, she took off the ring I'd given her and threw it away. She said all she cared about now was revenge and that she was going to train day and night until she was good enough to take the fight to the Death Eaters. That there ... *sniff* ... there was no sense in getting married anymore, that love c- couldn't survive in a world with so much *hate* in it. That - sniff - that even if we did get married, the Death Eaters would just come and ruin whatever happiness we might have."

His eyes opened, and a strange intensity came into them. "As she walked away, I suddenly realized ... *she was right*. The Death Eaters would never stop trying to ruin everything good in this world. And I *hated them* for it. *Hated the bastards*. In that moment, I just wanted to *hurt them* somehow. To hurt them like they'd hurt Marlene and her family, like they wanted to hurt *everyone I cared about!*"

Then, his head snapped towards Severus, and his eyes blazed so feverishly that Snape almost leaned back in his chair from the sight of them.

"And then, at that exact moment ... *There! You! Were!* Severus Snape, who knew more dark curses than most of the Hogwarts professors. Who was the real mastermind behind every bit of cruelty Mulciber and Avery inflicted on the school, including the '*harmless joke*' that sent Mary MacDonald to the St. Mungo's psych ward. Who called Lily Evans a Mudblood and made her cry for weeks when she thought no one was watching! Who I was *certain* would join the Death Eaters once he was out of school and would probably rise straight into the Dark Bastard's inner circle!"

Despite himself, Snape folded his arms as if subconsciously trying to conceal the Dark Mark under his sleeve. Sirius's eyes looked wild, as if he were caught up in a dream.

"There you were, sneering and sniping and trying to find out where Remus went every time there was a full moon! And I just ... snapped! I said to myself '*if the Junior Death Eater wants to see a werewolf so bad, I SHOULD JUST LET HIM!*'"

Then, almost instantly, the fury died, and Sirius slumped, seemingly drained of all his energy.

"So ... I did. I told you how to get past the Whomping Willow because in a moment of rage and madness that would have done Mother proud, I wanted to hurt you because I thought you were practically a Death Eater already. But ... after you left, I came to my senses and realized what I'd done. I spent the rest of the day as a nervous wreck. I used ...." He paused. "I had ... an item that let me know where people in the castle were. I watched it for hours while scared out of my wits. I assumed you *knew* what Remus was, and I just couldn't imagine you'd really go down there. Then...." He swallowed once more. "You *did*. I ran to tell James what I'd done and what you were doing as a result, and he dashed out of the room to save you."

"But *you* did not!" Snape said coldly.

"I wanted to! I was going to!" Sirius exclaimed as if protesting his innocence.

"THEN WHY DIDN'T YOU?!" the Slytherin raged.

Despite himself, Sirius barked out a laugh. "Would you believe it was because of Peter *Fucking* Pettigrew? He was always closer to Remus, just as I was closer to James. And

when I revealed what I'd done, he went *berserk*! Even as James was racing out the door, Wormtail jumped me and knocked me to the ground. Then, he just started wailing on me and screaming obscenities in my face! Little bastard even knocked two of my teeth out! Then, some of the others in our dorm pulled him off me. By that time, the Head Boy had shown up, and *no one* was getting out of there. I had to sit in the Infirmary and wait to find out what happened while Madam Pomfrey was regrowing my teeth and healing my bruises. About an hour later, Dumbledore showed up to tell me how much trouble I was in."

Snape glared at that.

"And pray tell, how much trouble *were* you in, Black?"

Sirius twitched in embarrassment. "Not as much as I should have been, I know. Dumbledore couldn't reveal the truth about what I did for fear of exposing Moony, so he let it be known that I'd played a particularly cruel prank for which I'd be in detention for a month. That was the most he could give me without having to document all the details about what had happened for the Board of Governors. He also made it clear that if it *weren't* for Moony's situation, he'd have expelled me for what I did. And that if you'd actually been hurt or killed, he'd have turned me over to the Aurors."

He stopped suddenly. Then, his eyes widened, and he gave another hopeless laugh.

"What are you laughing at now, Black?" Snape growled.

"Irony," he said with a delirious snicker. "Cruel, cruel irony, I spent twelve years in Azkaban for a crime I didn't commit. The maximum penalty for attempted murder by someone between the ages of 15 and 17 is only *seven* years in

Azkaban. I just realized for the very first time that I'd have been better off if Dumbledore had turned me over to be tried and convicted."

"Why are you telling me this, Black. Don't pretend it's a guilty conscience."

"I don't know if it's guilt or regret or what, Snape. I hated you so much back then. I dunno – maybe I still do. I do know there's a snake tattoo on your arm and I can guess you did some awful things to get it. And I know you hate me too. I guess all this time I've been clinging to the idea that you really were out to get Remus, and that's why I told myself that you deserved it, that it was just a joke gone wrong."

He crooked an eyebrow at Snape. "After all, I imagine that's what you tell yourself about Mary MacDonald, right?"

Snape grew angry at that, but Sirius moved on before he could respond. "But the fact remains – except for that one moment where I lost control, I never wanted you to die, Snape. I mean that. For what it's worth ... I'm sorry."

"Sorry?!" the other man spat. "*Sorry?! I don't believe you, Black. If you *ever* felt any guilt over that night, it was because you endangered your pet werewolf. Not because you had any hesitation about my fate.*"

"That's not true!" Sirius answered hotly. "I see now that what I did was wrong, and I really am sorry!"

"You and I have hated each other from the second we met! Do you truly expect me to believe that had it not risked Lupin's own life, you would have regretted my death for a second?!"

"YES!" the other man yelled defensively.

"WHY? Why would you have even hesitated to see me torn apart if you and your friends could get away with it? Why would you *ever* expect me to believe you ever regretted what you did?"

"BECAUSE I DIDN'T WANT TO BE LIKE THEM!" Sirius screamed, his voice breaking. "I DIDN'T WANT TO BE A KILLER! A MONSTER LIKE THE ONES THAT TORTURED THE McKINNONS!" As he raged, tears flowed freely down his face. "I DIDN'T WANT TO BE ... A *DEATH EATER*!"

With that, he fell back against his pillow with his hands over his face as he wept uncontrollably. Snape stared speechless at his old enemy's desperate outburst. Despite himself, he looked down at his left arm which still bore the Dark Lord's mark, and he could not help but recall the things he himself had done to earn that mark. And the things he'd continued to do to preserve his cover even after he'd turned away from the one who'd marked him.

And then, he had another thought that crept unbidden into his mind. He remembered an incident from just a few weeks earlier when the Other Potter had come to him to apologize for past insults. Full of righteous indignation, he told the boy that he would *never* accept an apology from the Marauders under any circumstances. In retrospect, he now realized that he simply had not been able to imagine any of the Marauders ever apologizing to him with anything approaching sincerity. He closed his eyes and dilated his perceptions so that he could have a few moments to think about what had been said and, more importantly, how he *felt* about what had been said. Then, in a calm voice, with his eyes still shut, he spoke.

"I still suffer from wolf-fear as a result of that night. A magical stress disorder that triggers flashbacks when

forcefully reminded of my encounter with the transformed Lupin. Just due to our discussions this evening, I will likely need to take a Dreamless Sleep potion tonight. I will *literally* never forget what happened that night. And to be honest, I am not sure if it is possible for me to ever truly forgive you for what happened either."

Slowly, sadly, Sirius Black nodded in acceptance.

"*But*," Snape continued. "In light of everything else going on right now – the Dark Lord, the Death Eaters locked away in the Longbottom dungeon, the Horcruxes – perhaps it is ... *counter-productive* to ... mindlessly and obsessively *hate* you for it."

He finally opened his eyes and looked into the cold grey eyes of Sirius Black, now reddened with the tears he'd shed.

"Perhaps ... we can start with that and see where it takes us?"

Through his tears, Sirius smiled at Snape for literally the first time since their long and bitter association began. "Thank you! Thank you!"

Snape ignored the other man's expressions of gratitude as he reached for Ogden's bottle. "Don't thank me yet, Black," he said ruefully. "Not until we know what sort of hangovers we'll be facing come the dawn."

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### ***Almost two bottles later ...***

"Honestly, man, it's your own damned fault!" Sirius said with a slurred voice. "If you wanted to stay close to Lily, you



should have been brave enough to follow her into Gryffindor!"

Severus tried to glare at the other man, but the usual effect was spoiled by how glassy his eyes were at the moment. "Me? In Gryffindor? You cannot be serious!"

"I am *always* Sirius!" the Gryffindor said as he puffed proudly before collapsing into a fit of giggles. "Hehe! That never gets old!"

Snape rolled his eyes. "It '*got old*' before the end of your First Year. But as I said, surely you can't imagine me as Gryffindor material."

"I dunno -hic- about that, Snivelllaappe, *Snape I mean!*" He suddenly looked sheepish. "Sorry. That's gonna take some mental retraining on my part. But seriously ...!" He paused to giggle once more at the invocation of his name. "You were a *double agent spying on the Dark Tosser himself!* That's pretty bloody brave if you ask me!"

Severus shrugged. "It's a moot point. The Sorting Hat Sorted. I never had a choice in the matter."

"Pfft! I'm the first Black in three centuries *not* to get Sorted into Slytherin! You think the Hat didn't plan on putting me into the Dungeon at first?"

The Potions Master did a double-take. "The Hat wanted to put *you* in Slytherin? And you ... what, persuaded it somehow?"

"Weeeeelll, I don't know if *persuaded* is the right word, but I did give a convincing argument."

"... which was?"

He grinned broadly. "I reminded the Hat that I was a Black and that no family in Britain knew more about dark magic than us. So if it didn't put me into Gryffindor with my friends, I would one day return to Hogwarts and *burn it with Fiendfyre!*."

"And that actually *worked*?!" Snape asked in astonishment.

Sirius laughed. "The Hat's exact words were: '*Well, I guess that counts as boldness.*' The rest was history."

The corners of Snape's mouth twitched, a feeling he was so unaccustomed to that it was almost painful. While he drank firewhisky with some regularity and occasionally to excess, actual drunkenness usually triggered feelings of maudlin depression. This was perhaps the first time in his life that Snape had been intoxicated under circumstances that made him feel relaxed and easily amused rather than simply more bitter than usual.

"Out of curiosity, *do* you know how to cast Fiendfyre?" he asked.

"Nah! Not even I was ever that crazy. I mean, it might be *possible* that I hate *Peter* now enough to use him as a focus for the spell, but I doubt it." Sirius finished off his glass before reaching for the bottle. "You?"

"No." He paused for a few seconds. "Regulus can, however. I'm told he is ... remarkably skilled at it."

Sirius's eyes widened in shock. "Really?! Wow! That's ... kind of alarming actually." He thought for a moment. "Werewolves, ya think? Specifically, the one that went after his family?"

"I imagine so. Naturally, we've never discussed the matter. But that's the most likely choice for the target of his unrelenting hatred."

Sirius thought about that for a second. "Wait a minute! Do you, Severus Snape, mean to say that after everything was said and done, you never actually hated me enough to be able to summon Fiendfyre by thinking about me? Nor Remus? Nor *James*?!"

Snape took another sip of his drink as he considered the question. "Apparently not. Though to be fair, I never hated the Dark Lord enough to summon Fiendfyre, either. It does, after all, require a hatred so intense that one would sacrifice anything and everything for the chance to kill one's enemy. As much as you and I hated each other back in the day – and by '*back in the day*,' I mean '*earlier this evening*' – I don't think either of us would have ever considered a suicide attack against the other." Then, he thought some more. "Potter might have, perhaps. His hatred of me seemed ... purer than yours, which, in retrospect, was channeled against all blood purists among the Hogwarts student body rather than just me specifically."

"Nah!" Sirius said with a laugh. "James never really hated you. He was just insanely, obsessively jealous of you. There's a difference."

Snape did another double-take. "James Potter. Was *jealous*. Of *me*?!"

Sirius smiled. "From the day they met on the train in 1971, James was utterly smitten with Lily. He was in love with her before he knew enough about life to even know what romantic love was. Most of his craziest, stupidest ideas were really meant to impress her, which of course never

worked since she hated pranks. And until you dropped the M-word on her, you and she were attached at the hip while she would barely talk to James without either insulting him or hexing him. It drove him *insane*!"

"But ... but ..." Severus wasn't sure if it was the firewhisky that had him tongue-tied or astonishment. "He hated me from our first conversation on the train, even before he knew Lily's *name*!"

"Well to be fair, literally the first words you ever spoke to James Potter were to insult his intelligence, his desired House, and - since all his ancestors had been Gryffindors for the past 200 years - implicitly his worthiness to be a Potter."

Snape didn't respond to that. His mind was still reeling at the thought of James Bloody Potter envying *him* instead of the other way around.

"So, um," Sirius began cautiously. "Did you and Lily ever think about ... y'know?"

Snape glared at him silently. "If you mean, did either of us ever pursue ... *romance*, then the answer is no. She was my best friend. No, she was my *only* friend. If I had not been so stupid as to ruin things just to curry favor with bigots, perhaps we might have become something more. But I was stupid, and so we never did. To be honest, considering my own upbringing, I don't know that I would ever be able to open myself up to someone romantically, not even her. I ... did not have much ... experience with such things growing up."

Sirius nodded. "Rough childhood? I can sympathize. You were a Halfblood, right?"

"How did you know that?" Snape asked suspiciously. The other man shrugged.

"I knew when we met on the train you couldn't possibly be a Muggleborn, and I can't imagine you surviving in Slytherin if you were. But I've never heard of any Pureblood families named Snape, and I'm pretty sure I'd remember a name like that."

Snape grimaced. "My father was a Muggle named Tobias Snape. My mother was born Eileen Prince."

Sirius's eyes widened at that. "Prince?! You're *heir* to the Noble House of Prince?!"

Snape laughed bitterly and shook his head. "My grandfather was so incensed at my mother's marriage that he ejected her from the family. Madness on his part. The House is dormant now because there weren't any other surviving heirs."

"Heh. Remind me to take you downstairs at some point. You can see where Mother blasted my name off the Family Tree."

"She didn't treat you well, I take it?"

"Nope! Neither her nor Father. Violent lunatics, both of them. You?"

Snape hesitated, but then recalled Black's casual references to getting caned by his mother for minor slights. It suddenly occurred to him that the other man might actually understand his upbringing in a way that no one else ever had. Not even Lily, whose parents had always doted on her.

"Apparently, my mother never told my father she was a witch until after the marriage. He snapped her wand and forbade the use of magic in our home. Needless to say, when I began demonstrating accidental magic, he ... was displeased."

"*Displeased*. Yeah, I bet I know what *that's* a euphemism for. My parents were *displeased* pretty often as well. And your mum didn't do anything?"

"She ...." Snape paused. "I don't know how to explain her actions to this day. I don't know why she ever married him. Why she stayed with him. Why she simply acquiesced to his demand that she not use magic. Why she tolerated his abuse of us both."

Sirius furrowed his brow in concentration as he tried to absorb Snape's words through a haze of alcohol. And then, to Snape's shock, he grinned and let out a belly laugh. Snape grew angry.

"My home life amuses you?" he spat.

"What?" Sirius replied excitedly. "No, no, no. It's just ... I had an *epiphany*! Hold onto your hat, Snape, because as Lily would have said, *this will blow your mind!*"

Then, he leaned forward and stage-whispered to the other man.

*"If I'd gone into Slytherin like the Hat wanted, you and I would have been best friends!"*

Severus stared at him in astonishment and then barked out a laugh of disbelief. "What?! That's ... that's madness!"

"No, Sev, no. Just think about it. Me and you as 11-year-olds sharing a dorm in the scary Slytherin dungeons? Both of us coming from abusive homes? Both of us having just been separated from our best friends, one of whom was a Muggleborn and the other from a notorious blood traitor family? Oh yeah! We'd have been *best buds*. We'd have probably stayed up all night comparing childhood traumas!"

Snape put his hands over his face as Sirius continued.

"And it might have been better for both of us. You'd have helped me do better in Potions. I mean, I did fine in general – got a NEWT, of course – but you could have pulled me up to an O. And in exchange, I could have gotten you a make-over!"

At that, Snape's head jerked up. "A ... *make-over*?!" he sputtered.

"Oh, don't give me that shocked expression, Sev! Harry told me that you were the one who told him to sort out his own hair, something no one's ever been able to get James to do. I'd have done the same for you if we'd been friends back then. *And* gotten you some clothes that weren't all-black." He tilted his head. "You should wear lots of red with your complexion. No wait! Red would be tacky.... *Burgundy*!"

"I assure you, Black, that I can imagine no universe in which you and I became fast friends by bonding over our shared psychological flaws. Nor one in which I would allow you to decide my fashion choices no matter how good you think I would look in ... *burgundy*!" He paused. "Oh, and don't call me Sev!"

"Well, I'm sorry!" He suddenly paused to burp loudly. "But I need a new nickname for you since I can't use the one I

used back when we hated each other! You don't like Sev? Okay, how about ... *Snappy!*"

"I can think of nothing more likely to turn us back into sworn enemies once more."

"Alright, alright," Sirius said while holding a hand up in a placating gesture. "I'll keep working on it."

With that, he tipped the last of the Ogden's into his glass. There was a moment of silence between the two men, but one that was surprisingly companionable rather than icy.

"So anyway," Sirius began. "Now that we're such great friends and all, can I ask you a serious question? No pun intended for once."

"I think it incredibly premature to call us '*such great friends*' at this point, Black. Let's see how we get along when we're both sober and free of this room."

"Fine then. Can I ask you a question as Harry's godfather talking to his Head of House?"

Severus tilted his head as he considered the other man who, for once, seemed entirely serious (pun or no). Black leaned in towards Snape almost cautiously.

"Tell me about the Dursleys."

## Chapter End Notes

AN 1: The idea of Sirius going into Slytherin and becoming Snape's best friend (complete with "Snappy" and burgundy robes) is cribbed from one of my favorite HP fanfics, "Stages of Hope" by kayly silverstorm. I highly recommend it.



AN 2: Some of you may find Snape and Sirius's transition from "mortal enemies" to "eh, he's not so bad" to be improbable. Personally, I found the nearly psychotic hatred the two men had for one another in canon to be even more improbable, based as it was on fallout from The Prank. The way it's presented in canon, IMO, is that Snape was a jerk for trying to expose Remus and an idiot for going down to the Shrieking Shack if he knew Remus was a werewolf, that Sirius was a jerk for sending Snape to encounter a werewolf and an idiot for not realizing that it would endanger Remus's life, and Dumbledore was both a jerk and an idiot for apparently sweeping everything under the rug. I don't like writing stories about idiots and jerks, so here we are. And anyway, the idea that sticking two people who hate each other in a small enclosed space together will cause them to work out their problems has a long and storied pedigree, as the TV Tropes page for "Locked in a Room" can attest.

AN 3: Relatedly, I should clarify now about the timing of Snape's Worst Memory (SWM) and The Prank. I had always assumed that the former occurred right after the Marauder-era kids took their OWLS and The Prank sometime later. However, it was pointed out to me that Lily knew James had saved Severus prior to their breakup, which puts The Prank sometime in their Fifth Year. This, however, means that the Marauders put Snape through SWM after nearly killing him with The Prank, which has the effect of making all four Marauders into loathsome psychopaths completely unworthy of any sympathy. So I ain't doin' that. In the POS-verse, SWM happened in June of 1976. The Prank happened at a presently unspecified point sometime in October or November of 1976.

# **The Blackest Day Pt 3**

**Harry Potter  
and the Death Eater Menace**

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## ***CHAPTER 30: Blackest Day pt. 3 (The Women)***

**The Leaky Cauldron  
Diagon Alley  
4:45 p.m.**

Ted Tonks grimaced in pain as he flexed his wand hand and ruefully examined the vivid red scar that cut across it. It was an ugly burn mark that stretched from the base of his palm halfway up his fingers, a curse scar that would never fade. Nor, it seemed, would the pain it caused – pain that, according to the best Healers at St. Mungo's, would rob him of nearly 40% of the mobility in that hand. He could still use a wand for most spells that were OWL-level and below. He was still a wizard, and one exceptionally knowledgeable in the healing arts. But he would never again have the manual dexterity for the ultra-delicate healing spells that were a professional Healer's bread-and-butter.

Of course, all things considered, Ted had still gotten off easy. It had been Fiendfyre that caused his injuries, after all. As such, it was utterly miraculous that he'd gotten away with just a curse scar and a loss of manual dexterity in one hand – such an injury *should* have rotted his whole hand off

within minutes of receiving it and then killed him painfully in less than a day. As far as the St. Mungo's curse specialists knew, only phoenix tears (and in extraordinary quantities) administered immediately after the injury could have saved his life, but there were no phoenixes around that day. Accordingly, his survival *relatively* unscathed was a topic of great interest to the St. Mungo's spell-damage specialists. And also, he suspected, to the Unspeakables.

Even then, he'd spent weeks in a healing coma at St. Mungo's, followed by several more weeks spent under close medical observation. He'd only been released a few days earlier to find that not only had his home and clinic been burnt to the ground, but the smoldering earth itself was also tainted by the Fiendfyre that had destroyed it. Wizards, for the most part, had nothing comparable to Muggle homeowner's insurance since they normally could simply use magic to repair even the worst damage in the blink of an eye. Apparently, however, that was not an option for Ted and his family, as the land upon which the Tonks Clinic stood was so contaminated by Dark Magic that the Ministry would not permit them to even try to rebuild for at least five years.

For the foreseeable future, the three Tonkses would be staying in a two-bedroom suite at the Leaky Cauldron, accommodations that had the benefit of being in London and thus close to St. Mungo's for outpatient therapy. But every day spent here was a day neither he nor Andromeda were practicing medicine, and Ted knew all-too-well that his and Andi's savings were limited. He would have to find work soon, some job that paid well (or as well as could be expected given his current disabilities). Just then, the door to their suite opened, and Andromeda Tonks herself entered bearing a furious expression and a crumpled copy

of *The Daily Prophet*. Ted suspected the two were connected somehow.

"Oh hello, luv. Been out shopping?" he said amiably.

"Shopping?" she snapped. "Don't be ridiculous! We can't afford such extravagances!"

He nodded. "Yes, I was just thinking along those lines. I think I've basically completed as much of a recovery as can be expected, so perhaps we should take stock and decide what employment options are available to us. Perhaps hit up old Dewey Crenshaw at the Children's Wing of St. Mungo's?"

She scoffed. "Oh yes, I'm sure St. Mungo's would be *thrilled* to have us. A Muggleborn Healer and his wife, the sister of Bellatrix Lestrage, both of whom fostered the infamous outcast, Theo No-Name! And whose house was recently burned down with Fiendfyre in the middle of the first Death Eater attack in over a decade, one led by Sirius Black, *another* Death Eater member of our extended family! I'm sure new patients will be lining up for treatment!"

"Now, now, darling. I'm sure things aren't as bad as all that," he said before she whirled around on him in a fury and slammed the *Prophet* onto the table.

"DON'T PATRONIZE ME!" she shrieked loud enough to startle the man. "There's an article in there by Rita Skeeter about us! Just full of snide innuendo and dark insinuations! *I won't have it, Ted Tonks! I won't! I won't! I WON'T!*"

Ted's eyes grew wide at his wife's outburst. "Of course not, dearest," he said gently. "But what do you propose to do about it?"

"Kill the bitch," Andromeda said flatly and without a hint of irony.

Ted blinked twice. "Well ... that *seems* a bit ... excessive, Andromeda. Perhaps I should read this article myself before we make any ... *permanent* decisions." He opened the paper and pretended to look for Skeeter's article.

"By the way, dearest," he said as casually as he could, "have you taken your pills today?"

She didn't answer. After a lengthy silence, he looked up at the witch. "Andromeda ...?"

"No, I haven't!" she spat angrily. "I've run out."

"Oh," Ted said softly, as if he'd just realized a predator had entered the room and he didn't wish to startle it. "How long ago did you run out?"

She looked away and absentmindedly started wringing her hands. "Since the fire," she finally said. "They were all burned up. And while you were in hospital, I was ... distracted. I ... I just forgot for a while."

"Oh, well, that's certainly understandable," Ted replied nonchalantly even as he moved his hand closer to the pocket where his wand was located. "We can just pop over to Lennie's shop in South Croyden. You remember Cousin Lennie, don't you dearest?"

"Of course I remember your idiot Muggle cousin, Ted!" she said irritably. "But *that's not important now!*"

"It's not?" Ted's hand moved slightly closer to his wand. He wondered if he could still cast a Stunner with his injured hand. It would be quite embarrassing if he accidentally

dropped his wand while trying to cast a Second-Year spell. Perhaps fatally so. "So, what *is* important to you right now?"

She looked at him as if he were an idiot. "Why, killing Rita Skeeter, of course! I was thinking mantichore venom. What do you think?"

"Well, it's certainly a painful way to ... *Oh, hello Dora!*" he loudly exclaimed as their daughter, Nymphadora Tonks, entered the suite. Andromeda turned around quickly, but before she could even say anything, Ted whipped out his wand.

**"*STUPEFY!*"**

Andromeda slumped in the ground.

"DAD! WHAT THE HELL?!" Nymphadora Tonks exclaimed in shock.

Ted didn't answer at first. Instead, he rose and scooped Andromeda up in his arms before moving her to a nearby couch. Then, he conjured a Muggle-style pen and a surprisingly Muggle-looking pad of paper onto which he quickly scribbled two notes.

"Dora, listen to me carefully. I need you to go to this address. It's a Muggle chemist's shop in South Croyden owned by my cousin, Leonard Tonks. Give him this and tell him I sent you and that it's for Andromeda."

The girl shook her head in exasperation, and seemingly in response, her hair turned peppermint green. "Dad, what's going on?! Why did you stun Mother?!" She glanced down at the second note. "And who the hell is *Lithium Haldol?*"

"I stunned your mother because based on past experiences, she was a few minutes away from having a violent episode where she might have hurt herself, us, or all the above. And Lithium Haldol isn't a person, Dora, it's a thing. Or rather two things. Lithium and Haldol are both Muggle pharmaceutical drugs used to treat mental illness."

She looked at him in confusion. "I don't understand. If Mother is sick, we should take her to St. Mungo's!"

"*St. Mungo's can't help her!*" he said angrily. Then, he dropped down into the easy chair next to the couch. "Believe me, we've tried."

He rubbed his hand over his face and gently took his daughter's hand into his own. "Magical healing can do *amazing* things, Dora. We can instantly heal even the deadliest physical maladies; regrow organs, skin tissue, and bone; and perform what Muggles would call miracles. But despite all that, there are still many areas where, as much as wizards don't want to admit it, Muggle medicine gets better results than our best efforts."

"Like what?" Dora said nervously as she looked down at her unconscious mother.

Ted sighed resignedly. "Like ... the treatment of congenital mental illness. Mind Healing in Wizarding Britain is focused entirely on curing Dark Arts-related maladies that affect the brain, but they have no spells that address mental ills that aren't magical in nature ... and worse, they don't even see the need to. If we carried your mum to St. Mungo's and described her symptoms, they'd have either prescribed a Calming Draught and sent her home ... or they'd have locked her up in a padded cell for Merlin knows how long. It's well-known that a variety of psychological disorders run

in the Black Family, so much so that any British Mind Healer would just dismiss it as '*the Black Madness*' and not even bother with treatment."

"The ... Black Madness?" the younger Tonks said uncertainly.

He looked down fondly at his wife. "We never told you how one of the Black Sisters, the Three Furies of Slytherin House, could have ever ended up marrying a Muggleborn, did we? Your mother was ashamed of what happened to her, though she had no reason to be, and I respected her desire for privacy ... until now. But I think you deserve to know, particularly since Andromeda may be ... difficult for the next few days."

He reached over and brushed the hair from Andromeda's forehead. "When we were in Fifth Year, I came across her completely by chance in an empty classroom late at night ... *cutting herself*. She refused to go to the Infirmary - said she'd curse me if I told anyone. So, I stayed with her and healed her injuries myself as best I could. We stayed up all night talking. And we continued talking in secret for weeks to come. She was in a state of severe depression over an arranged marriage to Rodolphus Lestranger, but it was clear she had other issues too. When she wasn't depressed, she was manic and prone to violence against people who angered her. At one point in our Sixth Year, I narrowly interrupted her attempted suicide. And that was the last straw. Over the summer, I talked her into running away to join me in London and meet my dad."

"Your dad? But he was just a Muggle. What could he have done?"



"Oh, you have no idea what Muggles can do, Dora. It's my fault, I suppose – as a Muggleborn, I was so enamored of the Magical world that I neglected your Muggle education. Anyway, your granddad passed away before you were born, but back then, Jeffrey Tonks was nothing less than the Chief of Neurology for Maudsley Hospital in South London. In no time flat, he diagnosed your mother as suffering from clinical depression, bipolar syndrome, and mild schizophrenia. And he also prescribed a regimen of Muggle psychotropic drugs that successfully treated her issues. As much as we came to love each other back then, I still think the only reason she defied her family to marry me is because if she'd married a Pureblood bigot instead, she wouldn't have been allowed to take Muggle drugs, and she couldn't bear going back to the way she'd been pre-medication. We eloped at Christmas during our Seventh Year because it was the only way to both break up the marriage to Lestrage and ensure that she could continue treatment."

He sighed deeply again. "Which, I'm afraid, she ceased to keep up with while I was in a coma and then in convalescence. The drugs are out of her system and she's having a relapse." He looked back up at Dora.

"Which is why I need you to apparate to that chemist's shop, Dora. I'd go but I need to stay and look after your mother. The shop's run by a cousin of mine. You've never met him because technically he's not supposed to know about magic. And also because, for some damned fool reason, wizard-folk getting Muggle pharmaceutical prescriptions filled by Muggle chemists is considered a violation of the Statute of Secrecy." He gave her a firm look. "*So don't get caught.*"

Nymphadora took the two notes dumbly and headed for the door before turning around. "The Black Madness," she said again. "Am ... am I at risk for it?"

He smiled at his daughter. "I don't think so. To be honest, I've been quietly watching for signs of any form of mental illness practically since you were a baby and never noticed anything that gave me pause. Your mother insists that because you've got a Muggleborn father, any hereditary madness has skipped you. Maybe she's right."

The young Auror-trainee nodded and then quickly left the room. Her thoughts were troubled and distracting as she headed down the stairs, so much so that she wasn't paying attention and passed right by a familiar figure without even noting her presence. Of course, the other woman didn't notice Nymphadora either.

Augusta Longbottom had a lot on her mind.

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### ***Moments later...***

It was a rare thing indeed for Rufus Scrimgeour to be truly surprised. Sometimes, he gave the appearance of surprise, but that was usually just anger that someone had done something incredibly stupid. In such cases, what appeared to be surprise at an unexpected situation was actually exasperation over something that was foreseeable but only likely to happen as a result of shocking idiocy. But actual genuine surprise was a rare thing for him.

At 5:00 p.m. on the dot, there was a knock at the door to the room he'd reserved at the Leaky Cauldron. Specifically, he'd reserved Room 13, a room which was often rented out for meetings of a most sensitive nature because it had an unusual number of specialized wards permanently erected

on it specifically for private and highly sensitive meetings (and which consequently cost a pretty galleon to rent out even for a few hours). Not that Rufus didn't add his own temporary wards to those venerable spells, of course. Only a fool placed his trust in even the most immaculate wards that he didn't place himself. He took a moment to double-check those wards one final time and then limped over to open the door... and was genuinely surprised.

For on the other side was not Lucius Malfoy who he'd been expecting, but rather Lady Augusta Longbottom, who he knew quite well from their school days, but who he had not been social with in decades. For a good three seconds, the normally unflappable ex-Auror simply forgot how to speak. Then, the moment passed, and he gallantly invited Augusta into the meeting room.

"Well, well, well," he said as he walked with his guest over to the meeting table in the center of the room. "This was ... most unexpected, your Ladyship."

Then, he smiled and wagged his eyebrows. "Or, in light of ancient history, may I call you Gussie once more?"

She sniffed. "If it will facilitate things, I suppose you may, Rufus. But we are here on business, not to give you a chance to relive our school days in any sense of the word. You had your chance in 1947, and Archie was quick to take advantage of your lapse in judgment."

"True, true," he said with a regretful sigh. "But that does not prevent me from regretting my mistakes, Gussie."

"Regret it on your own time, Rufus." She sat at the table and regarded Scrimgeour imperiously. "You know why I am here?"

He stared at her intently for several seconds. He knew the purpose of the meeting, of course, but why Lady Augusta Longbottom was involved in the Azkaban conspiracy let alone its representative to this meeting was a mystery. But then, in a flash of intuition, the answer came.

"Ahh! The Lestranges. The opportunity for revenge for your son and daughter-in-law brought you into the Azkaban affair. Tragic business that, made more so by the intrafamilial nature of the feud. You *do* have a measure of Black blood in you, after all."

Augusta didn't rise to the provocation. "My mother, Charis Crouch was born a Black, but my connection with Bellatrix is remote. I believe she is a Third cousin twice removed, hardly close enough for me to feel any sense of ... *affection*. But Black blood does flow in my veins, and when one of us is wronged, even by another of the family, our blood calls out for vengeance. Does that answer your unspoken question?"

"That question being '*what are your feelings about the Azkaban escapees?*' It does, dear lady. I find that I am more sanguine about joining your conspiracy now. Indeed, I find the thought of joining forces with *you* far more inviting than with some I could imagine. Speaking of which, what brings you here in place of that paragon of virtue, Lucius Malfoy?"

She gave him an imperious glare. "I shall tell you nothing about my ... associates until I am sure of your intentions."

"You wish to know if my intentions are honorable?" He said with a laugh while making his way over to the little bell sitting on the mantle. "Are you *quite sure* you do not wish to relive our school days, Gussie? I had planned on waiting until after this meeting for supper, but since the company is much more charming than I'd planned, perhaps we could

order now. My treat, of course. And then, we would have time to discuss both our school days as well as our ... future partnership."

As Rufus rang the bell to order dinner, Augusta crooked a suspicious eyebrow. She was beginning to wish she'd worn the vulture hat that her Great-Aunt Belvina Black had given her as a wedding present. It always had the admirable quality of putting would-be suitors in their place.

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## ***12 Grimmauld Place***

***5:40 p.m.***

Harry Potter stared up at the ceiling pensively and for what he thought might be the last time. He was having a lie-down in the bedroom that Sirius and Regulus had provided for him while he tried to recover from the panic attack that he'd just triggered by impulsively trapping Sirius and Snape in a room together. He'd expected to spend of the holidays at Longbottom Manor until Sirius's physical breakdown the previous day changed his plans. Now, he wondered if Sirius would ever want to see him again. Regardless, he decided that he should probably join Neville soon or his friend might get suspicious. Neville had not treated Harry noticeably different as a result of his discreet friendship with Theo, but the Gryffindor seemed almost paranoid about the possibility that Harry and Theo were meeting behind his back. Of all the reactions to the Ultimate Sanction that Neville could have displayed, *jealousy* was the last one Harry had suspected.

Suddenly, Dobby arrived with a soft pop. "Libations have been delivered to Lord Black and Professor Snape, sir, as promised."

"What did you send them?" Harry asked.

"A magnum of Ogden's Finest, sir," the elf replied.

"And ... you really think that will help?" the young Slytherin asked dubiously. Being only 13, he was not yet aware of the *medicinal* properties of firewhiskey, to say nothing of its usefulness for resolving seemingly intractable personality conflicts. Dobby looked supremely confident.

"Dobby assures his young master. *Nothing* can better persuade two adult wizards to resolve their differences than getting intoxicated together. It works for them just as well as," Dobby thought for a moment and then smiled, "as well as fighting a mountain troll in a lavatory does for First Year students."

Harry did a double-take. "How did you know about that?"

"When Dobby first entered the Great Master Harry's service, naturally, Dobby made ... *inquiries*. The tales of Master Harry's exploits at Hogwarts are well known to the house elves who serve the school."

"Uh-huh," Harry said, filing that insight away for later.

"Speaking of house elves, I asked you to distract Kreacher so Sirius couldn't summon him, but it occurs to me that I probably should have been more precise. What *did* you do to Kreacher?"

Dobby smiled with quiet satisfaction. "The Great Master Harry need not concern himself with the Kreacher elf. It will suffer no lasting harm. House elves are durable creatures ... no pun intended, of course."

"Right," Harry said sardonically.

*"So Kreacher isn't dead," he thought. "That's good. Well, for Reg anyway. I doubt anyone else alive cares about him that much."*

"Okay then," he continued aloud. "I guess you can go back to monitoring Sirius and Professor Snape to make sure they don't kill each other. Let me know if they do." He paused and shook his head. "Strike that – if they *try* to kill each other, *intervene* and *then* come let me know. If nothing's changed in a few hours, I will probably Floo over to Longbottom Manor for the evening and check back tomorrow."

"Understood, sir." Dobby bowed respectfully and then disappeared. After he was gone, Harry laid back on the bed.

*"Okay," he thought. "That's dealt with. Now to item #2 on my agenda – Sirius said something about Remus Lupin that ties in with his 'Secret,' but what was it?"*

Harry frowned at his inability to recall exactly what Sirius said earlier that nearly made the boy cry out in surprise before he was distracted by Regulus's own (and far less pleasant) reaction. By this point in his Occlumency training, Harry should have had a nearly perfect memory recall. He was now able to clearly remember incidents from his time at the Dursleys going back to age 4 and earlier with absolute clarity ... which was not necessarily a *good* thing considering what sorts of unpleasant memories those were. But oddly, though, they gave Harry a strange sense of pity for the Dursleys. Viewing the circumstances of his abuse objectively, the Dursleys weren't *bad* people so much as were *cartoonishly evil* people, so much so that it should have been patently obvious to any witch or wizard who observed them for more than ten minutes that they were under a curse.

To his own surprise, Harry had come to have some sympathy for the Potters' initial decision to foster him out. If they truly believed him a squib, leaving him to be cared for in a *loving* home (which could have been confirmed by any number of non-invasive methods that complied with the Statute of Secrecy) was probably the kindest decision. His problem with the Potters was their decision to abandon him *completely* outside of setting up the crazy squib cat-lady in a nearby home to "watch over him" (and he also made a mental note to check into Mrs. Figg at some point and find out *exactly* why she'd acted as she had all those years). It would have been child's play to have someone more reliable check inside the house and even interview young Harry, perhaps under the pretext of the interviewer being "the trustee of the late Mr. Potter's estate." If nothing else, he wouldn't have grown up thinking his parents were a drug-addicted pimp and his prostitute.

Ultimately, though, Harry now believed that the Potters' actions were not malicious, though they were grossly negligent, so much so that he still occasionally flirted with the idea of taking revenge against them. Not violent bloody revenge; he'd promised Neville, after all. And nothing that would make Jim too upset with him, as he had come to enjoy his strange but increasingly warm relationship with his twin. In any case, as angry as he was with his birth parents, he wasn't going to burn any bridges any time soon. If nothing else, there was his share of the Potter fortune to consider. It wasn't as big as the Malfoy, Black, or Selwyn estates (or *another* one he could name), but 25-million galleons plus real estate and entailed property was nothing to sneeze at. And if he and James could come to terms on how many galleons it would take to make him happy, Harry might actually be willing to forgive his grossly negligent parents after all.



*"Always forgive your enemies,"* he thought to himself with a laugh. *"Nothing annoys them so much."* For a brief moment, he wondered where he'd heard that before. Then, his eyes widened as he remembered.

It was from Oscar Wilde.

Harry shivered. After his Mysterious Muggle-Repelling Aura and his disturbingly large vocabulary, the boy often thought that his strangest quirk might well be his extensive and preternatural knowledge of the works of Oscar Wilde. He'd never actually read a single sentence by the author, but that didn't stop situationally-appropriate quotes from regularly popping into his head. And it was always disturbing and frustrating whenever any thoughts popped into his head that were not his own.

Then, he froze in shock a second time as his thoughts about Oscar Wilde transitioned to darker thoughts regarding his mild phobia about being tampered with mentally – something he suddenly realized had just happened! He'd just set himself to reviewing the conversation that took place in Sirius's bedroom looking for clues as to what Remus Lupin's magically-concealed Secret was. And almost instantly, despite his rigorous mental self-discipline honed by years of Occlumency training, his mind had immediately started wandering into memories of the Dursleys, the Potters, and eventually, Oscar Wilde. The insidiousness of the psychic diversion reminded him of his earliest sessions with Mr. X, back when his Occlumency was weak and he felt helpless before his teacher's Legilimency.

"I am *really* starting to hate the Fidelius Charm," Harry said to himself ruefully. He reached down for his bookbag and pulled out some parchment and a pen that he used to write some notes before he could be distracted again.

*Sirius, James, Peter, and Remus were part of a group/gang called the Marauders.*

*Sirius and James (and possibly the other two) discovered and befriended a **werewolf** that the Headmaster for some mad reason allowed into the school as a student.*

*Sirius nicknamed the werewolf Moony.*

*Remus Lupin (aka Wolfy McWolferson) was also nicknamed Moony.*

"Okay, I understand all that," Harry said aloud. "And if the werewolf and Wolfy McWolferson had the same nickname, there must have been a connection between them."

He slammed the pen down on the paper in frustration and anger.

"But *what was it?!*"

And so the mystery continued.

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***Nott Hall***  
***6:00 p.m.***

Tiberius Nott was practically jumping up-and-down as he waited impatiently by the Floo for his guest to arrive. He'd received the request to visit Nott Hall only two days earlier, and he'd immediately sent word for his Heir, Alexander Nott, to stay at Durmstrang over the Christmas break. He was conflicted over the decision. On one hand, he was proud of Alexander's progress at Durmstrang and thought the boy's success would reflect well on him in his guest's eyes. On the other, the boy, sadly, was weak-willed in many ways. And while Tiberius had successfully caused a rift

between Alexander and the Outcast, that fact did nothing for the likelihood that the Nott Heir might say or do something to embarrass his father in front of their guest. That was particularly true if Alexander somehow learned of Tiberius's vague hope that said guest might someday soon become Alexander's *step-mother*.

"Well," he thought distractedly, "*someday, anyway ... after his first step-mother meets a tragic accident in a few years.*"

The Death Eater glanced down at his house elf Rogo and grimaced. Rogo looked as pitiful and beaten down as normal, but Tiberius was suddenly conscious of the elf's hump that Tiberius himself had given it. It was an unattractive elf even by the standards of its wretched species, and the Death Eater was beginning to regret not having killed Rogo and replacing it with a younger healthier model before now.

Suddenly, the fire flared up and turned green for a few seconds as she passed through. Tiberius gasped despite himself. She was somehow even more beautiful in person than she had been in the old Death Eater's most fervid dreams. She wore a sheer white hooded cloak over ultrachic robes that would have cost Arthur Weasley a year's salary. Her hair was done in a meticulous braided updo, and Tiberius noted that it was now the color of spun straw but with a silvery tint. He was somewhat surprised. Lord Nott would have expected her to celebrate her recent divorce by dying her hair back to the midnight black for which the women of House Black were famous, but she instead seemed to have dyed it entirely blonde, albeit a prettier and more vivid shade than her popinjay of an ex-husband's coif.

"Narcissa Black, I bid you welcome to the House of Nott!" he boomed pompously. She curtsied delicately and then whipped off her cloak before tossing it casually to Rogo, who caught it with as much grace as his infirmity would allow.

"My Lord Nott, I am honored to be here in the hall of your ancestors. And I am more grateful than I can express that you responded so quickly to my entreaty."

"Nonsense, dear lady!" he answered gallantly. "You sent me an owl asking if I could provide lodging for you for a time without any outsiders knowing of your presence here. I understand your need for discretion and am happy to provide for you."

He took a step forward ... and then reeled slightly as her scent briefly overpowered his ability to think.

"Indeed, I would be happy to ... *provide for you* ... in any way you desire," Nott said in what he thought was a sensual manner but which was better described as "*pathetic*."

Nevertheless, Narcissa seemed pleased with his offer. In a slight breach of decorum which he definitely did not mind, the witch reached up and caressed his cheek with her hand. A visible shiver passed over Nott's body. She leaned in to whisper to him even though no one else was there.

"I am so glad you feel that way, *Tiberius*." He shuddered again as she said his name. "For I must ask something else of you."

"Anything."

She smiled. "Forgive me, but I must ask you to swear an Unbreakable Vow that you will reveal nothing of my

presence here, nor anything you learn about any *secret activities* in which I have been engaged."

For a brief moment, he looked offended and slightly hurt that she would ask for an Unbreakable Vow, and she placed her finger over his lips before he could speak to gently shush him. He shivered again.

"It is not for my benefit, Tiberius, I promise you. I *know* all about the honor of House Nott, and for me alone, your word would be more than enough. But we live in dangerous times, Tiberius. And I simply must ask this ... *for his sake*."

Nott was puzzled. "For ... *his* sake? Who are you talking about?"

She leaned in close as if she was about to kiss his cheek. But she whispered softly instead. "Tiberius, *you know who*."

For a second, he was still confused. But then, realization set in, and he became visibly frightened.

"You mean ...?"

"He lives, Tiberius," she said intently while holding his hands tightly. If she was secretly disgusted by their sweatiness, her face did not reflect it. "The Dark Lord lives and has need of us. Will you help me and prove your *worthiness* to sit at his right hand?"

He nodded mutely.

"Then swear the oath, Tiberius."

He swallowed deeply and agreed. "I will, I promise. But ... we need a bonder. Shall I call my solicitor...?"

Narcissa smiled and his heart melted a bit. "No need, Tiberius. I have someone at hand who can act as bonder."

With that, she turned back to the fireplace and threw in some Floo powder. At her direction, a man came through the Floo. Tiberius gasped. The figure wore Death Eater robes. He did not know the person's true name. But his bone mask, marked as it was by a strange black-and-red design that an educated Muggle might have called a "yin-yang symbol," identified him well enough.

"Mr. January, I presume," Nott said, as he desperately tried to conceal his fear. This was *not* how he'd expected the evening to go.

The Death Eater said nothing but simply nodded. Seconds later, Nott had his own wand out to swear the oath: that he would not reveal the presence of either Narcissa nor her "guest" to anyone else, that he would do whatever it took to preserve the secret of their presence at Nott Hall, and above all, that he would die rather than reveal any other secrets related to the Dark Lord or any of his servants that he learned while Narcissa and Mr. January stayed with him. There was a brief instant of panic at the realization that Mr. January would *also* be a guest in addition to Narcissa, but the witch put a hand back on his shoulder, and his weak resistance dissolved completely.

When the oath was completed, Narcissa turned to face Mr. January.

"Show him," she said.

Mr. January threw back his hood and peeled off his bone mask. Nott did a double-take.

"But ... aren't you dead?" he asked. The other man snorted in contempt.

"Congratulations, Mr. Nimrod," replied Barty Crouch Jr. "I really do think that's the stupidest question I've ever been asked."

Narcissa merely laughed.

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***12 Grimmauld Place***  
***7:40 p.m.***

After puzzling fruitlessly over the Remus/Moony connection for a while followed by an hour working on a rune scheme for the flying broom he was supposed to design and enchant over the holidays, Harry finally packed up his bag to head over to Longbottom Manor. Dobby had returned at 6:00 p.m. to say that Sirius and Snape had neither tried to kill one another again nor opened up a dialogue. Instead, they just glared at each other from across the room. On the bright side, neither had any idea how to escape the bedroom, so eventually, they would *have* to talk if only to escape boredom.

As he stepped out of his bedroom, Harry was suddenly distracted by shouting from somewhere in the house. It was not coming from the master bedroom, and it was definitely not a male voice either. Curious, he took a few steps down the hallway towards the noise. Then, he froze. He recognized the voice now, even though he'd only heard it once before.

It was the portrait of Walburga Black, Sirius and Regulus's mother, now screaming loud enough to wake the dead.

Unfortunately, Harry was rather more worried about her waking *Kreacher*, which was what she was screaming about. And since Harry's already-tenuous plan for Snape and Sirius would fall apart completely if Kreacher was able to answer Sirius's summoning, he decided to ascend to the attic and see if the mad painting could be placated somehow.

"KREACHER! KREACHER! COME HERE AT ONCE, I SAY!" the woman in the portrait shrieked. "I COMMAND IT ... *DON'T LEAVE ME ALONE!*" She added tearfully.

"Madam Black?"

Harry stepped cautiously into that part of the attic that had been cleared of debris to make room for a 5×10 stretch of wall that Dobby had renovated out of the foyer, the only way to remove Walburga's portrait from its former resting place.

"WHO'S THERE!?"

He took a few steps closer. "I don't suppose you remember me, Madam, but we met very briefly when Regulus first returned here a few months ago. My name is Harry Potter. I'm the son of James and Lily Potter and also Sirius's godson."

The woman sneered. "I don't recall you, brat, but I know your miserable excuse for a father well enough. It was he who turned my eldest boy against me. Against me and against everything our House has ever stood for!" She turned up her nose at him.

"Why are you here?!" she shouted. "*WHERE IS KREACHER?!*"



"Kreacher has been detained, Madam Black," the boy said calmly. "He will return to you soon, I believe, but he cannot come right now."

She practically hissed in anger. "If you are the spawn of James Potter and that filthy Mudblood he married, then you are naught but a Half-blood yourself. You have *no business* in the House of Black, you filthy little *mongrel*!"

Harry's eyes narrowed. Then, he flicked his wrist, and the Black Wand popped out of his holster and into his hand. She gasped in offended surprise.

"I think my being able to hold this wand in my hand, let alone being able to work magic with it, proves my right to be in this house, Madam Black. I'm the son of James and Lily Potter, but I'm also the grandson of your late aunt, Dorea. That makes us first cousins, once removed, does it not?"

She growled angrily. "Dorea should have been blasted off that tapestry when she married that blood traitor, Charlus Potter!"

"Right. *Toujours Pur* and all that."

"Our family's devotion to purity is our greatest strength, mongrel. It is what led the Dark Lord himself to invite so many of us to join his cause. Bellatrix and Regulus both rose meteorically among his followers, as Sirius would have had your wretched Muggle-loving father and grandparents not seduced him into degradation."

She gave a sickening leer. "I remember when I first heard that Charlus and Dorea had been slain by Death Eaters. It *thrilled* me!"

Harry's expression darkened in anger, but then, suddenly, his eyes lit up with inspiration. He remembered briefly discussing with the Headmaster how portraits interacted with the Fidelius Charm. Perhaps it was time for him to run some experiments of his own.

"Madam Black, by any chance, do you recall a fellow student from your Hogwarts days by the name of Tom Riddle?"

She narrowed her eyes and curled her upper lip at the change of topic. "I vaguely recall the Mudblood. He was a year behind me. A jumped-up little teacher's pet who became a Prefect and later Head Boy despite his inferior breeding. I never understood why Slytherins like Boruslav Lestrangle and Augustus Rookwood and so many others from good families followed him like loyal hounds. It was sickening!"

Harry smiled almost mischievously. "Would you like to know a Secret, Madam Black?"

He gestured with the Black Wand, and burning letters appeared in the air spelling out *Tom Marvolo Riddle*. Then, he slashed the wand, and the letters rearranged themselves to spell out *I am Lord Voldemort*. Walburga was speechless.

"... *impossible*," she finally gasped.

"What, that the Great and Terrible Lord Voldemort was the impoverished Mudblood son of a squib and a Muggle? Oh, I assure you that it's a lot more than *possible*. I learned it from the man himself. So, if I'm a *mongrel*, what do you have to say about the wizard whose blood is *less pure* than mine and who *you* wanted your whole family to grovel before?"

She shook her head and glared at Harry.

"It changes nothing, *boy*! Serving the Dark Lord was always but a means to an end for me. As powerful as he was, his blood could never have been as pure as that of House Black. Orion and I followed him and encouraged our sons to do likewise because he promised to restore Pureblood supremacy over the Mudbloods and blood traitors who wanted to pollute our society, to infect our culture. But more than that, *I* followed him because under his regime, the House of Black could have completed the Great Working and *forged the final link in the Unbroken Chain!*"

Harry blinked. "Nope. Sorry. I've no idea what any of that gibbering nonsense means."

Her eyes lit up madly. "The Unbroken Chain, mongrel! The ultimate expression of our devotion to Pureblood ideals - a wizard whose power would outstrip all others, including the Dark Lord! And it was to be Regulus's destiny to bring forth that transcendently pure wizard - *Merlin Reborn!*"

Harry stared mutely at the deranged woman for several seconds before bursting into laughter. "Merlin ... Reborn?! What are you *talking about*?! I mean, yeah, Regulus is a powerful wizard, although, to be honest, I think he only became a *great* wizard when he got the hell away from *you*! So how exactly was he supposed to bring forth the Merlin Reborn?"

In response to Harry's mockery, Walburga bared her teeth like a wild animal. But then, she did something that Harry had never seen before in a moving portrait. It was common for portrait subjects to move around inside a frame or even to exit the frame to the left or right, usually to transition into another frame hung in a different location. But Harry

had never seen a portrait subject *move forward* within a painting *towards the one viewing it*. And that was what Walburga Black was doing now – moving forward towards the frame, her body taking up more and more of the portrait's surface as if she were preparing to crawl through the frame and out into the attic with Harry. He barely fought down the urge to step back away from her.

"How, mongrel? How does *anyone* bring forth new life into the world except through *childbirth*! You have told me a secret I did not know. So, tell me, do *you* know *Regulus's secret*?"

"Which one? I imagine he ... has ... several ...." Harry's snarky comment died on his lips as he suddenly realized the significance of the mad woman's words. "Childbirth.... Regulus is ... I know he's a secret Metamorphmagus. Are you ... are you suggesting...?"

He stopped, unable to complete the thought. And so Walburga finished it for him. By now, she was close enough to the surface of the portrait that Harry could see the sickly yellow of her teeth.

"When the time was right, when the stars were in the most propitious alignment to facilitate such an ... *unusual* conception and pregnancy, Regulus was to assume a female form so that *she* might later become the *mother* of the greatest wizard ever born."

Silence reigned for nearly five seconds before the boy exploded.

"*YOU'RE UTTERLY INSANE!*" Harry shouted. "I mean, I *knew* that already, but to hear out loud how sick you really are ...! And you thought Regulus would go along with this?!"

She shrugged diffidently. "If he was truly loyal to the ideals of our family, he would. And if not? Well, I was always quite proficient with *the Imperius Curse*!"

Harry stood slack-jawed as he tried to process through the horror of the woman's rantings. For the first time in his life, he considered the idea that his own childhood with the Dursleys might not have been so bad. Then, he swallowed painfully, as another (and even more disturbing) thought popped unbidden into his head.

"If Regulus was meant to be *the mother* of your wizarding Messiah or whatever ... who was going to be *the father*?"

She leaned forward and seemed to press her hands against the inside of the portrait. This time, Harry could not resist taking a step back – her hands seemed to flatten, as if the surface of the portrait were nothing but a pane of clear glass that might give way if she pressed too hard and allow her passage into the real world.

"Who would have been pure enough to sire Merlin Reborn, you mean?" She began to laugh maniacally. "Stupid mongrel child! There was only ever one choice! Why do you think, even after his betrayal and expulsion, *that I never had Sirius killed*!"

Then, she began to laugh louder and more hysterically. Harry's nerve finally broke, and he turned and fled the attic with the sounds of Walburga Black's madness still ringing in his ears.

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***Longbottom Manor***  
***8:00 p.m.***

Alone in Longbottom Manor since returning from King's Cross, Neville Longbottom had allowed himself to stay engrossed for hours in a book about the more obscure uses of Mandrake roots that Professor Sprout had given him for extra credit work. It was only when his stomach growled loudly that he realized how much time had passed. The clock on his bedside table said it was eight o'clock, and neither his grandmother nor Harry had returned to the Manor. Neville decided to have a light supper in his room rather than sit alone in a big empty dining room, and so he called out for the family house elf.

"Hoskins?"

There was no reply. Surprised, for there had never been a single prior occasion when the house elf had not instantly answered his summons, Neville called again and then a third time. Curious now, the boy made his way downstairs to the kitchens. Not only was the family's chief house elf not around to answer his call, but there were several dirty dishes in the sink, a sight Neville had thought impossible in a household with an elf as competent as Hoskins.

Now both confused and exasperated, Neville did the only thing he could think of.

"Lumpen!" he called. Almost instantly, the decrepit elf appeared, although he was facing the wrong way, and it took him a few seconds to realize where Neville was.

"Oh, my goodness!" Lumpen stammered in excitement. "Master Nicholas, er, that is ... Master ... Nigel?"

"Neville," the boy said gently. "I'm sorry to bother you so late, Lumpen, but do you know where Hoskins is?"

"Hoskins, Master Neville? Oh, let me see, let me see."  
Lumpen closed his eyes and stood still for nearly ten seconds. Neville was concerned that the elf had fallen asleep while standing up (possibly had *died* while standing up) and was just about to call his name again when the creature opened his eyes excitedly.

"Oh, yes, yes, yes, Master Norville. Lumpen is not sure but *thinks* that Hoskins is somewhere down in the dungeons."

"Oh, okay," Neville said before pausing in surprise.  
"... *the dungeons?*"

---

Five minutes later, after being persuaded by Lumpen that Longbottom Manor did, in fact, have its own dungeons, Neville found himself in the side corridor that connected the parlor and the conservatory. Following Lumpen's rather confusing instructions, Neville twisted a particular wall sconce, and to his amazement, a section of the wall slid aside to reveal a hidden staircase that he'd never known about despite living in this house his entire life. Somewhat nervously, the boy cautiously made his way through the secret passage and down a dark stairwell that led to a sub-floor of the Manor, one that apparently contained dungeons dating back to Longbottom Manor's 13th Century origins. As he descended, wall sconces every few feet suddenly lit up with white flames that illuminated the area.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs (some forty feet below the lowest level of the house – as far as he knew before today, anyway), he found a long corridor, with heavy metal cell doors every ten feet or so.

"Hello?" he called out nervously. "Hoskins? Are you down here?"

There was no answer at first. But then, faintly, he could make out a beaten rasping voice that called out: "*Please ... help ... me....*"

Alarmed, Neville rushed forward, ignoring the first three cell doors (although as he ran past the third door, he bizarrely thought he could hear strange music from inside).

"I'm coming!" he called out. "Hang on, Hoskins!"

Inside the fourth cell, Miss Demeanor sat on her knees on the far side of the cell, as far from the door as she could get. Between her and the door was a long series of carefully inscribed runes that she had painstakingly scratched into the floor with her own blood as well as that of the unconscious house elf that lay beside her. She focused on the magic that she would have to cast without a wand, magic cast solely through incantation and an elaborate runic array, while she did her best to block out the excited chittering of Bellatrix Lestrange, the madwoman with whom she shared co-ownership of this body.

As Neville drew near, Miss Demeanor took the knife she'd Transfigured for herself out of a metal buckle and used it to slash both her palms. A few seconds later, she could hear her "rescuer" just outside the cell door, and she could see the face of a vaguely familiar boy look through the grate in the door right at her. His face immediately registered his shock and horror at the sight of her. Miss Demeanor screamed a single word at the top of her lungs and then slammed her bloody hands down on either side of the nearest rune.

**"BOMBARDA!"**



Immediately, that first rune lit up. Then the next one. Then two more. It wasn't as fast as casting via wand, but it was fast enough. Neville turned to run, but he made it less than ten feet when the door blew off its hinges. A terrible concussive force picked him up and flung him down the corridor. He bounced off a wall and then landed on the floor, stunned and bleeding from his broken nose.

Seconds later, Miss Demeanor ran out of the cell straight for him. Neville tried desperately to pick himself up — even stunned by the explosion, there was a part of him screaming that "*Bellatrix Lestrange is coming!*" But it was too late. The escaping prisoner ran up to him and kicked him in the head, ending all resistance. She searched him quickly and found the wand he'd never even bothered to take out of its holster for fear he might be tempted to violate the rules against underage magic.

Miss Demeanor held the wand aloft and concentrated. It was not a compatible wand, but her will was strong enough to make it work. After a few seconds, angry red sparks shot from the tip, as if the wand was offended to be held by her but unable to do anything about it. She pointed it down at Neville's prone body.

"**INCARCEROUS!**" she growled. Instantly, thick ropes appeared and slithered over the boy's body. His arms were cinched tightly behind his back, with the rope leading up to wrap around his neck in a fairly tight noose. It was the perfect rope formation for keeping a prisoner contained and under control ... and choking him to death if he presented any difficulties.

"*Why are you wasting time with ropes and knots?!*" The woman's rasping voice echoed down the corridor as the

mind of Bellatrix Lestrange briefly seized control of their shared voice. "*Kill him! Kill him and be done with it!*"

She took a deep breath, and Miss Demeanor regained control. She looked back down upon her captive. "*Kill him, Bellatrix? Nonsense! Where's your sense of creativity? We can come up with options far more amusing than that!*"

# HP&DEM31: The Blackest Day (pt 4)

## Chapter Notes

### SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download it. Paperback prices are coming soon. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and no thinly disguised allegories about tolerance. Oh, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything. The back-cover blurb is at the end of this chapter in the Author Notes.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

## Harry Potter and the Death Eater Menace

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***Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling I make no claim to ownership.***

### ***CHAPTER 31: The Blackest Day Pt. 4 (Bella Unchained)***

*"INCARCEROUS!" Miss Demeanor growled. Instantly, thick ropes appeared and slithered over Neville's body. His arms were cinched tightly behind his back, with the rope leading*

*up to wrap around his neck in a fairly tight noose. It was the perfect rope formation for keeping a prisoner contained and under control ... and choking him to death if he presented any difficulties.*

*"Why are you wasting time with ropes and knots?!" the woman rasped, as the mind of Bellatrix Lestrangle seized control of her voice. "Kill him! Kill him and be done with it!"*

*She took a deep breath, and Miss Demeanor regained control. She looked back down upon her captive.*

*"Kill him, Bellatrix? Where's your sense of creativity? We can come up with options far more amusing than that!"*

At her feet, Neville groaned and started to stir. The Death Eater flicked the wand she'd stolen from him. Nothing happened. Then, she focused her will and flicked it again more forcefully. This time, Neville was lifted up and slammed against the wall where he floated a few feet off the ground. She sauntered over and placed the tip of the wand under his chin.

"Who are you, boy?" she growled.

Neville said nothing. He simply glared at the woman in hatred even as he tasted the blood trickling down from his nose. But there was also fear in his eyes despite his Gryffindor courage. He knew this woman, what she'd done, and what she was capable of. She pressed his wand into his neck painfully.

"I assume my reputation precedes me, boy," Miss Demeanor said haughtily. "But in case it has not, I am Bellatrix Lestrangle, the Dark Lord's most trusted enforcer. Tell me, boy - are you familiar with the Cruciatus Curse?"

His eyes widened, and while the fear in them grew, so did the hatred. His desire for revenge against his captor for what she'd done to his mother and father warred with his terror that she would send him to join them in St. Mungo's. He slowly nodded.

She smiled cruelly, but internally, she knew that to an extent she was bluffing. At this particular moment, Miss Demeanor was not at all certain she could actually *cast* the Cruciatus Curse, and she was quite certain that she would not be able to cast the Avada Kedavra. Her time in Azkaban had weakened her considerably, and the blood loss and short-term magical exhaustion from casting a Blasting Hex solely through runes and blood magic had weakened her further.

But worst of all was the problem of the wand she had obtained from her captive. She was accustomed to forcing her will through incompatible wands, but this was different. This wand *hated* her! She had not won its allegiance in a true duel but simply snatched it off the boy when he was barely conscious. But more than that, she could feel genuine hostility coming from it, and she feared it might well backlash against her if she tried to use it to cast an Unforgiveable against its true master.

"Again, boy, what's your name?"

He gritted his teeth silently. In response, she twisted the wand slowly, causing the noose around Neville's neck to gradually tighten. Not enough to cut off his breathing, but definitely enough to make him worry about it.

"N-Neville!" he gasped out. "Neville Longbottom!"

The woman's eyes lit up deliriously.

*"Longbottom! Longbottom! Teeny-widdle Longbottom all grewed up! Ahahahah!"*

Her voice and facial expression instantly changed. The cold methodical woman who had captured him suddenly turned into a cackling lunatic who practically sang his name in a high-pitched childish voice.

"And where are Mumsy and Daddykins, widdle Nevi-kins? I remember how they screamed. And then how they drooled! Are they here too? Tee-hee! Or did they even survive that night so long ago?"

"They're cough they're in St. Mungo's, you evil bitch!"

"Ahahahaha!" she giggled madly. "Filthy blood traitors suffered and are suffering still! Delicious!"

She raised Neville's wand and pointed it right between his eyes. "Would widdle Nevi-kins like to go visit Mumsy and Daddykins?" she asked with a vicious smirk. "Forever and ever?"

But before Bellatrix could cast the spell, the woman suddenly shouted *"NO!"* and jerked the wand back down before taking a step away from the boy.

"We need him!" she exclaimed, once more using the controlled and precise voice she'd been using at the start. Then, to Neville's astonishment, the mad woman proceeded to have a heated argument *with herself*, constantly looking from side to side with each head movement accompanied by a change in both voice and character.

"Need him?! Ridiculous! What need have I with the spawn of two blood traitors?!"

*"Just slow down and think for once in your life! We don't*

*even know where we are or who else is here! Our first priority is escape. Not ... cheap entertainment!"*

"You're so weak! It's no wonder the Dark Lord loves me more than you!"

*"Loves ... you?! You ridiculous cow! The Dark Lord doesn't even know you exist! You are but an aberration borne of the tortures of Azkaban after his fall!"*

"Tortures you left me to endure alone while you hid in the catacombs of my mind! And now you won't even let me kill a helpless child!"

There was a brief lull in this strange conversation before the woman spoke more calmly and soothingly with the smooth cadence of Miss Demeanor.

*"Bella, Bella. You're right. You're absolutely right. I treated you poorly and I am so, so sorry. But that's the past. What matters now is serving the Dark Lord by ensuring his return to glory. Do that, Bellatrix Lestrange - bring the Dark Lord back - and then he will truly love you above all others. Even me."*

Apparently, that was enough to placate the woman's more deranged self. The woman looked back to Neville with a strange mixture of cold precision and manic glee, but when she spoke, it was with the measured tones of Miss Demeanor once more.

"Now, Neville Longbottom, you will answer my questions completely and without hesitation. If you lie to me, I will know it. If you defy me, you will be punished. *Harshly!* Do you understand?"

Neville said nothing ... until the noose tightened once more. Then, he nodded swiftly.

"Good," she purred. "Let's start with something simple. Where exactly *are we*?"

---

### ***Meanwhile ...***

Harry stepped through the Floo into the parlor of Longbottom Manor and waited. Then, he waited some more before looking around in confusion. Typically, when someone entered the Manor via fireplace, Hoskins was on hand at once to greet them. Or deal with them, as the case may be – Lady Augusta had become quite *aggressive* in her security procedures since bringing four Death Eaters into her and Neville's home. After a few more seconds, Harry called out for the elf.

"Hoskins? Hoskins!" Harry frowned and then tried again. "Lumpen?"

That attempt had better results, as the Longbottom's other house elf materialized after just a few seconds.

"Good evening," Lumpen began brightly, "Master ... Henry?"

"Close enough," Harry said. "Do you know where Hoskins is? Or more importantly, I guess, where Neville is?"

"Neville?" the confused elf began. "Oh, you mean Master *Nigel*, sir. I believe you will find them both down in the dungeons, young master."

"Oh, okay ...." Harry paused and blinked twice. "Sorry, could you expand on that?"

After another thirty seconds spent questioning an elderly and confused house elf, Harry had his eyes squeezed shut



as he fought down the urge to scream "GAAAH!" at the top of his lungs. Another twenty seconds were spent in a futile effort to give Lumpen instructions on what to do if, for example, one or more hardened killers suddenly came running up the stairs from the dungeon, but Harry finally gave it up as hopeless and sent the elf away. Resisting the urge to pop out his illegal second wand, he made his way towards the entrance to the dungeon moving as stealthily as he could while still being able to claim he wasn't sneaking if he bumped into Neville.

Moments later, Harry had reached the entryway to the dungeons, and with an angry grimace, he saw that the secret door was still open. Then, his heart froze in his chest as he heard voices drifting up from the dungeon. With a flick of the wrist, the Black Wand fell into Harry's hand, and as softly as possible, he whispered the incantation for the Supersensory Charm to eavesdrop on the disturbing conversation taking place below.

By this point, Miss Demeanor had spent nearly five minutes interrogating Neville with only minimal interruptions from Bellatrix LeStrange. She learned that she'd been removed from Azkaban about four months prior and had been held for at least part of that time in a secret dungeon beneath Longbottom Manor that the Longbottom Heir himself knew nothing about before today. He also had no idea how she and the others had gotten here or why. He had no idea why one of her three fellow inmates had his face concealed behind an iron mask apparently charmed to continually play an annoying Muggle song.

Worst of all, it appeared that the others were under the effects of Draught of Living Death, and Neville had no clue where her captors – Snape, Malfoy, and the surprisingly-not-dead Regulus Black – had been storing the antidote. And

so, Miss Demeanor reluctantly decided that her best choice was to flee Longbottom Manor with the boy in tow and then use him as a hostage to exchange for the other three prisoners. Naturally, Bellatrix Lestrange quickly registered her disapproval with a string of loud obscenities.

All this Harry heard from up the stairs. And as he listened, he tried desperately to think of what to do. Hoskins was not responding and might well be dead. Dobby, if summoned, would not be able to apparate through the Manor's wards and would only be able to come via Floo, which might take several minutes during which Harry would be alone and exposed next to the fireplace where Bellatrix was headed next. And if Harry himself left via Floo to summon help, Bellatrix might well escape and take Neville with her before they could return. He closed his eyes and dilated. With his mind in overdrive, he went through every single combat strategy he'd learned from Mad-Eye Moody, but he seriously doubted that he was ready to fight a duelist of Bellatrix's caliber, even as weak as she might be after Azkaban. Then, he suddenly released his dilation and slapped his forehead at his own foolishness.

*"Idiot! Why would you even try to duel Bellatrix in a straightforward fight?! You're a Slytherin! Cheat!"*

And with that epiphany, Harry turned and crept back as silently as possible to the parlor. There, he dropped to his hands and knees next to the large sofa that was situated opposite the fireplace. As softly as he could, Harry hissed. And then ... he hissed again.

---

***Two minutes later ...***

Neville gritted his teeth in a mix of pain, anger, and fear as Bellatrix forced him up the stairs and into the Manor. His hands were still bound behind his back with a rope that also wrapped around his neck. Whenever he didn't move fast enough to suit her, the Death Eater could just grab the rope and twist it, simultaneously choking him and cinching his arms up painfully. Grudgingly, he led his captor to the parlor. But then, he gasped in horror as he heard another voice calling out his name.

"Neville!" Harry called out from down one of the halls.  
"Where are you, mate? I haven't had dinner yet and I'm starving!"

Then, Harry himself stepped into the parlor through one of the other doors, seemingly without a care in the world and with his holly-and-phoenix wand jauntily stuck behind an ear. He grinned upon seeing Neville at last, only for his expression to change to one of horror when he made eye contact with the woman behind his friend.

"Holy smoke!" he exclaimed, his face a mask of complete astonishment. "It's Bellatrix Lestrange!"

"HARRY!" Neville yelled. "RUN!"

Harry ignored the instruction and instead reached for the wand behind his ear only for it to be sent flying away with a blindingly fast Expelliarmus. Harry appeared shocked and surprised to be disarmed so quickly, and he immediately thrust his hands up in the air in surrender.

"Wait! You don't want to kill me!"

Miss Demeanor looked at him quizzically. "I don't? What on Earth leads you to that deluded conclusion?"

"W-well, um, for one thing, my dad is the Chief Auror," he stammered. "If you kill me ... or even *hurt* me, I bet, he'll come after you with the whole Auror corps behind him!"

She sneered. "Do you think I fear the Aurors, boy? Do you know how many of them I have slaughtered in my time?!"

In fact, Harry knew *exactly* how many Aurors Bellatrix Lestrangle had killed and under what circumstances, having basically memorized Alastor Moody's files on the topic. His face revealed none of that, however, and he seemed terrified and near tears at the thought of insulting the Death Eater.

"Okay, sniff, how about this – I'm keyed into the Longbottom wards! If you promise to let me and Neville go free – oh, and not to *hurt us* or anything – I can open the Floo so you can get away!"

"Harry, no!" Neville exclaimed before his captor tightened her grip on the rope around his neck.

"It'll be okay, Neville. Just trust me." Harry turned his gaze from his friend to the woman behind him. "Do you agree, Madam Lestrangle?"

Bellatrix snorted at being called "Madam" but appeared to consider the offer. She smiled cruelly.

"Very well, boy. I accept your terms. Open the Floo and throw some powder on the fire. Little Neville and I will step in so I can call out the address. And then, I'll push him back out of the fireplace and leave you two in peace."

"Harry ...!" Neville choked out as a tear rolled down his cheek.

"It will be okay, Neville," Harry said in a shaky voice while blinking back tears himself. Lestranger was lying, of course. Harry didn't need Legilimency to know her plan was to kill or at least heavily curse him as soon as the Floo was active. As she pushed Neville around the sofa, Harry eased his way over to the fireplace and the pot of Floo powder next to it. "Do you believe me?"

Neville said nothing until Bellatrix tightened the noose again. "Answer your little friend, widdle Nevi-kins!"

"I ... believe you," he sniffed without conviction. "It'll ... it'll be okay."

Harry bent down to open the lid on the Floo powder jar.

"Things are going to work out, right, Neville?" Harry asked.

"Yeah sniff things ... things will work out."

"You're still my compass, right?" Harry said almost casually as he reached in for a pinch of powder.

Neville blinked in surprise at the question. "Always, Harry," he answered firmly.

Then, Harry turned to look straight into Neville's eyes. There was no doubt in them, no fear. He didn't really seem to have even been crying. To Neville's amazement, Harry's expression was now seemed utterly confident and self-assured.

"So, will my compass think less of me if I kill this woman?" he said in a cold voice.

Suddenly, Neville understood. Harry hadn't been afraid or panicking or cowardly. It had all been an act. Harry was

completely in control. There hadn't been one second when he wasn't.

"Not one bit!" Neville spat angrily.

As Bellatrix realized what that last exchange meant, she grew angry. With one hand, she pulled on the rope around Neville's neck, while her other hand extended Neville's wand towards Harry. But it was already too late. Instantly after Neville's reply, Harry uttered a short *hiss*. For a second, Bellatrix was paralyzed by the realization that the boy in front of her was a Parselmouth. And then, she *screamed* as the shiny black snake that Harry had summoned and then hidden beneath the sofa to await further instructions darted out with lightning speed to bite her on the ankle.

At the same time, Harry extended his right hand towards her, dropping the Floo powder as he did. In response to his mental command, the Black Wand flew from its hiding place between two sofa cushions into his waiting hand.

"***EXPPELLIARMUS!***" he cried, and with a flash of light, Neville's wand was knocked from Bellatrix's hand, and the woman herself was knocked backwards to the ground. As Harry rose and moved towards Neville, he idly held out his free hand and summoned the other boy's wand before it could even hit the ground. With a quick *Finite*, Harry dispelled the ropes binding Neville before returning his wand to him. He turned towards the screaming woman on the floor who was writhing in agony as a deadly Black Mamba continued to bite at her legs furiously. With a gesture and a soft hiss, Harry dismissed the conjured snake.

"So," Neville said as he rubbed his throat. "I reckon this means you are a Parselmouth after all."

"Yeah," Harry said ruefully as he pointed his wand to keep Bellatrix covered. "I'd appreciate it if you kept that under wraps though."

Neville nodded. Then, he glanced down at his wand that Harry had summoned from across the room. "And you know wandless magic?"

Harry turned to look at his friend and blushed slightly. "Um, just the one spell, actually."

The other boy blinked before looking down to the Black Wand in Harry's hand. "And you also have a second wand?" He looked to the nearby bay windows for any signs of owls before turning back to Harry almost reproachfully. "That doesn't have a Trace, apparently. How many secrets *have* you been keeping from me exactly?"

Harry sighed. "Too many, and way more than I ever wanted to. But your Gran will be back soon, and if she gives the okay, I'll tell you everything."

Neville nodded at that and then did a double-take.

"MY GRAN KNOWS ABOUT ALL THIS?!"

"Well of course she does, Neville," Harry replied blithely. "How else do you think we ended up using the Longbottom dungeons?"

Neville started to inquire about these *dungeons* that his ancestral home now seemed to have, but he was distracted by an agonized moan from the woman on the floor. Instantly, he and Harry both turned and pointed their

wands at Bellatrix, but she seemed barely conscious through her obvious pain.

"So," Neville began, "what do we do about her?"

Harry sighed in resignation. "I don't know that we need to do anything about her at this point. That snake I summoned was a Black Mamba, one of the most venomous snakes on Earth. And it looks to have bitten her at least half-a-dozen times. She'll be in a coma in the next few minutes and dead probably in fifteen."

Neville processed that, and then his eyes suddenly widened in shock. "Oh, Harry! I'm so sorry!"

The young Slytherin looked to him in surprise. "It's Bellatrix Lestrange, Neville. What could you possibly have to feel sorry about?"

The other boy shook his head. "I'm not sorry for her but for you, Harry. I mean, *you asked me* to be your moral compass more than two years ago because even then you were afraid of someday turning into a dark wizard. And now, at the age of 13, you've killed somebody by sending a venomous snake after her in order *to save my life*! Heck, your '*moral compass*' actually gave you permission to do it!"

"None of that is your fault, Neville. We were in a kill-or-be-killed situation."

"Maybe so, but still, I wish there had been another way."

Harry stared at his friend in shock. "Do you *really* mean that, Neville?"

"Well, yeah," Neville said without hesitation. Then, the Gryffindor nearly took a step back from the intensity of



Harry's gaze. He knew that Harry was a passive Legilimens, but until this moment, he'd never truly felt the sensation of being *scrutinized* by the other boy.

Finally, having satisfied himself as to Neville's sincerity, Harry swiftly bent down to yank off his left shoe. He twisted the heel, and it slid aside to reveal a secret compartment out of which a small dark object fell into the palm of his hand. He held it out to Neville.

It was a bezoar.

As Neville stared at the instrument of Bellatrix's salvation, Harry spoke.

"As it turns out, Bellatrix Lestrange, despite an incredibly long list of criminal convictions, has never actually done anything specifically to harm me or anyone else in House Potter. Certainly nothing to justify me killing her except in self-defense. You're the one whose parents she came after, Neville. You're the one she hurt, the one whose childhood she stole. And so, you should be the one to decide what happens to her. And I'll support you completely whatever you choose."

Neville did not respond at first. He just stared intently at Harry's palm as if hypnotized by the bezoar while, at his feet, the last seconds of Bellatrix Lestrange's life continued to tick down.

---

Five minutes later, Harry and Neville stepped back to examine their handiwork. After Neville fed the bezoar to Bellatrix, Harry immediately stunned and bound the woman before she showed any signs of waking. Harry then summoned Dobby through the Floo so that the elf could convey the woman back down to the dungeons. The trio

found an empty cell (her own was no longer secure due to her improvised Blasting Curse) where Dobby affixed her to the floor with a powerful Sticking Charm. The elf also provided a gag, a blindfold, and even some thick reinforced mittens that he claimed would seriously impede her ability to use wandless magic, even assuming the witch woke up before the rest of the conspirators arrived to decide her fate. Along the way, they found poor Hoskins, and after a quick Renervate followed by some basic healing charms, the Longbottoms' chief elf seemed as good as new.

Harry looked over to his friend who seemed relieved by Hoskins' survival but otherwise completely shell-shocked.

"You alright?" he asked.

Neville nodded without taking his eyes off the unconscious Death Eater he'd just helped restrain. "So, what happens next?"

"I'll send Dobby out to contact Lady Augusta and ... the others."

"The others being ...?"

"Sorry. Can't say without permission. Oaths and all that. Anyway, as soon as they're here, I suppose we'll spend some time reviewing our security arrangements." He swallowed. "And possibly making *other* decisions. As I understand it, we've gotten all the information out of the three Lestranges that we can. I'm not sure, but I think there's probably a consensus for ... well, for ending all this."

"How? Turning them in to the Aurors? Or ...?"

Harry made a face. "I'm pretty sure it's ... '*Or*.'"

Neville paled. "If you knew Lestrangle and the others were just going to be killed anyway, why did you even give me the option to save her?"

Harry looked down at the unconscious Death Eater and then back up at the young man who was more of a brother to him than his own twin.

"Because of what you said. Because I didn't want *you* to have played any part, no matter how small in killing her. Because, like I said by the lakeside when we were firsties, I think you're better than me, and I don't want that to change."

Neville stared at Harry in astonishment for a long moment before speaking. "Can you ... can you look after things from here? I ... I need some time alone. To think."

"Of course. I'll send one of the elves for you when everyone is ready to meet."

Neville nodded before heading for the exit. Then, he stopped and turned back towards Harry. "You're better than you think you are, Harry. Don't ever believe otherwise."

And with that, he left Harry alone with his thoughts.

---

### ***Hours earlier at the Leaky Cauldron ...***

*Nymphadora Tonks's thoughts were troubled and distracting as she headed down the stairs, so much so that she wasn't paying attention and passed right by a familiar figure without even noting her presence. Of course, the other woman didn't notice Nymphadora either.*

*Augusta Longbottom had a lot on her mind.*

Then again, neither Tonks nor Lady Augusta paid any attention to a third figure who had just entered the Leaky Cauldron. In their defense, however, Regulus Black wasn't currently wearing a face they might have recognized. Instead, it was an older man with a rugged face and a dour expression (and who Muggles of a certain age might have recognized as character actor Herbert Lom) who strode up to the bar and gruffly asked for a bottle of firewhiskey.

Two hours and three bottles later, the drunken wizard was leading half the bar in a rousing chorus of "Hoggy Warty Hogwarts" when he felt a beefy hand on his shoulder.

"A lovely song to be sure, boyo," said a deep voice with a familiar Australian accent, "but I reckon you've had enough to drink."

Regulus turned around so quickly he almost fell, and then his face lit up at the sight of his father-in-law, Buck Macmillan.

"Ha! I know you!" he slurred as he pulled the older wizard into a hug. "You're hic the only wizard I trust. The only per hic person who won't let me down." Then, he turned back to the members of his impromptu chorus.

"Boys! Say hello to Buck Macmillan!"

"Hi, Buck!" a dozen or so intoxicated wizards exclaimed cheerfully.

"Buck's the bestest, most wonderfulest bloke to ever wander in off the Australian Outback," Reg proudly said even as he put his arm around the other man's shoulders

and held on for dear life to avoid falling to the floor. At his description, the crowd cheered Buck's name again.

"And also the best damned Auror that any of you reboprates ... reprobobs ... that you sorry lot have ever met!"

The crowd's enthusiasm quickly dimmed at the announcement that Buck was an Auror, even if a retired foreign one, and within seconds, Reg was alone with Buck.

"Awww! We hadn't even gotten to the third verse yet!" he said dejectedly.

"You can sing it to me up in my room ... over a big pot of coffee," But said as he put his hand around Reg's waist to support him. "And you can explain why you've picked now to go on a bender."

Reg snickered at that. And as the two men made it over to the stairs, Regulus leaned in close to (loudly) whisper: "How didja know it was me, Buck?"

Buck leaned his head away from the burning stench of his son-in-law's firewhiskey breath. "Wasn't hard. I noticed someone making a ridiculous spectacle of themselves. And then, I noticed he looks like Inspector Bloody Dreyfus!"

"Pfft!" Reg said haughtily. "That's *Chief* Inspector Bloody Dreyfus!" he corrected in a deliberately awful French accent.

Thirty minutes later, after Regulus had been forced to drink most of a pot of hot coffee prepared by Buck (who was notorious for drinking his coffee almost poisonously black), the wizard had sobered up enough to remember why he was upset but not to the point that he could talk about it without crying. And also not to the point that he could

change back to his normal shape. Although he was adept at Metamorphmagery, it was not a skill one would want to use while intoxicated ... unless one wanted to get stuck with a pig's snout or beaver teeth for a few hours.

But even as drunk as he was, Regulus was happy to have his surrogate father on hand to share his problems with. So he did. For a good half-hour, he told Buck about everything that had happened over the last few days, culminating in Sirius revealing the secret of how he'd tried to feed Severus Snape to a werewolf as a cruel joke.

"I just can't ..." he started before pausing to wipe at his eyes. "After everything that's happened. After everything I've done, all the sacrifices I've made, just to free Sirius ... to think that the whole time he was *that sort* of person. I just feel so stupid."

"For what?" Buck asked. "For reaching out to estranged family? For risking your neck to fix an injustice? And as for him being *that sort* of person, well, d'ya remember that talk we had all those years ago when y'told me your real name? How I asked ya if there was something you needed to atone for?"

Regulus bristled. "I remember you saying you'd never ask me what it was," he said.

"And I still won't, Rusty. But I will ask you this: On a scale of one to ten, with ten being, oh I dunno, a Dark Lord or something like that, is whatever sin you were runnin' from better or worse than what your brother did to that Snape bloke?"

Regulus's eyes widened, and he looked away.

"Okay, if you don't want to answer that question, how about this one: You said your brother tried to murder Snape by sending him to meet a werewolf. So be honest with me, Rusty. Would you *really* be quite as angry with him if he'd tried to murder the fella by *any other means*?"

*That* question left Regulus speechless, as he was forced to consider the extent to which his anger at Sirius was driven by his deeply personal hatred of werewolves. But before he could formulate an answer, the two wizards were startled when a house elf popped into Buck's room.

"Master Regulus...!" Dobby began before freezing in surprise. "Oh, Dobby does apologize most profusely. Dobby is looking for ... someone else and expected to find him here. Would kindly wizards happen to know if ... *someone else* just left this room and where he ... *or she*, as the case may be, might have went?"

"Dobby," said Reg. "It's me. Regulus. I'm just ... looking different at the moment."

Dobby blinked several times. "Yes, Dobby certainly sees that to be the case." He shook his head. "Ahem. In that case, Master Regulus, Dobby is being here to deliver a message on behalf of the Great Wizard Harry Potter. To wit: Come quick! She nearly got loose!"

"Bloody hell!" Regulus sad as he shot out of his chair only to nearly fall over.

"Hold your hippogriffs, Rusty," Buck said. "Thank you, er, Mr. Dobby. '*Master Regulus*' will be along directly."

Dobby nodded despite his momentary confusion at being referred to as "Mr." And, after glancing once more at

Regulus's altered – and obviously intoxicated – form with a dubious expression, the elf popped away.

"Come on, Rusty. You're in no shape to apparate right now. And if one of your prisoners who I ain't supposed to know about has busted loose, you'll need my wand."

Regulus shook his head. "I can't ask you to do that, Buck. It might be ...." He paused before clenching his lips together tightly as his eyes bulged. Then, he ran over to a trashcan beside a nearby writing desk and vomited into it for almost a minute. As Reg climbed back to his feet, Buck came over bearing a bemused expression and cast a quick Scourgify on his face and shirt.

"You were saying?" he asked with a smirk.

"Yes, well, I suppose an extra wand would never hurt."

Moments later, Regulus and Buck passed via the Floo Network from the Leaky Cauldron to Longbottom Manor, stepping out into the parlor with their wands drawn. Instantly, every one of the six people already in the parlor pointed their own wands at the intruders.

"Who the devil are you?" Augusta Longbottom asked imperiously. But before either Reg or Buck could respond, Severus Snape (who was half-sitting/half-lying on a chaise longue while holding an ice pack to his forehead) scoffed contemptuously.

"If I'm not mistaken, it's *Herbert Lom*! For Merlin's sake, Regulus, *is that the only film you've ever seen?!*"

---

The majority of the Azkaban Conspiracy (plus a few new faces) spent the next several minutes waiting in the parlor



while everyone but Buck and the two minors downed Anti-Intoxication Potions. Neville assumed his Gran would be completely scandalized by the state in which Regulus, Sirius, and Snape arrived, and so he was utterly gobsmacked when Augusta also asked for one for herself and for Professor Scrimgeour who had accompanied her to the Manor. For his part, Harry was visibly annoyed to learn that while he and Neville had been fighting for their lives against an escaped Death Eater, all the "responsible grown-ups" were apparently out getting drunk. That he himself had essentially forced Sirius and Snape to do so did not lessen his disapproval.

Finally, the Floo flared up one last time, and the last conspirator stepped through: Lucius Malfoy who was wearing silk pajamas and a velvet dressing gown, as he had come straight from his hotel room in Le Quartier Magique in Paris. Harry stepped forward to greet him.

"Good evening, Lord Malfoy. Do you require an Anti-Intoxication Potion? Or perhaps a hangover remedy?"

Lucius furrowed his brow at the boy's odd question. Then, he looked around the room and at the state of most of those in it. "What the devil have you people been up to in the mere twelve hours since I left here?!"

As the others continued their recoveries, Lucius and Harry went down to the dungeon to inspect the scene of Bellatrix's breakout. Along the way, they made chit-chat about Draco's first semester at Durmstrang, as the Malfoy Heir himself was currently sound asleep in their Paris hotel suite. Draco had been sorted into House Bogatyr (thought Lucius still wasn't sure what significance that had compared to the Hogwarts Houses) and was a Seeker for one of the lower-form Quidditch teams (Durmstrang did not

have House teams as Hogwarts did but instead had separate competitive leagues for Years 1-4 and 5-7).

Soon, however, Malfoy's full attention was on the wreckage of Bellatrix's former cell. There, the wizard spent some time studying the runes that the witch had carved with her own blood in order to improvise a wandless Bombarda, and he murmured his approval of her resourcefulness. Then, the two checked in on the woman herself who was still bound and unconscious in a different cell. Hoskins was there as well, standing in the corner in silent watch over the prisoner. Somewhat disturbingly, he was also holding what appeared to be a large kitchen meat cleaver.

After their return, the entire group retired to the dining room, where the long table was transfigured into a circular one large enough for the entire group: Harry and Neville, Augusta and Rufus, Regulus and Buck, Sirius and Snape, with Lucius bringing up the rear. Sirius and Snape briefly pulled Harry aside, and both said that while they were to some extent grateful for Harry's "boneheaded and Gryffindorish intervention," that would not deter Snape from giving him a month of detentions when school resumed, with each session split evenly between more psychic training and vigorous cauldron scrubbing. For his part, Sirius congratulated him on "a fine prank" and said James would be proud. Although not the most observant person, Sirius was still taken aback by the look Harry gave him before the boy schooled his features into a mask of politeness.

But before Sirius could inquire further, Augusta called the meeting to order and quickly filled in the late arrivals as to evening's shocking developments. Harry, for his part, had downplayed the potential danger that he and Neville had been in, but most of the adults were suitably impressed at

how skillfully he'd taken down even a weakened Bellatrix, though they were horrified by how narrowly they'd avoided disaster.

"But the question remains," Augusta said imperiously. "The Lestrangle woman was recaptured, but she did place my grandson in danger and indirectly the rest of us by how close she came to escaping our custody and thus exposing our activities."

Neville winced at the reminder of how his ignorant mistake had nearly led to catastrophe. After he'd sworn an oath to maintain the group's secrets, Harry told him about *everything*, including the horcruxes. As *insane* as he'd thought it was to break convicted Death Eaters out of Azkaban, Neville was forced to admit that stopping Voldemort from being reborn justified the breakout.

"Through Professor Snape's interrogations," Augusta continued, "we know where the Lestrangle woman has secreted the Hufflepuff Cup, which we believe is one of You-Know-Who's horcruxes, and the Professor believes that further interrogation of her mind would be too dangerous and risky to justify any likely reward. He has also indicated that there is nothing left to learn from the Lestrangle brothers and that attempting Legilimency against Augustus Rookwood would be fruitless if not fatal. And so, we are left with the question: what do we do with them now that we have no further use for them?"

"The tone of your question, Lady Augusta," Rufus said crisply, "hints at your preferred answer. You wish to simply execute them and be done with it, don't you?"

"I'm told the Muggles have a concept known as *Occam's Razor*," Lucius said languidly. "It states that the simplest

answer is usually the best one. And we all know what the simplest answer to our conundrum is."

"That's not ... *exactly* what Occam's Razor means, Lucius," Snape said. "Regardless, I do not see the need to make any rash decisions. Notwithstanding the day's events, we have successfully kept all four prisoners contained since August. We have time to make a carefully considered decision as to how to deal with them going forward. And remember, we still must figure out how to rid ourselves of them in a manner that also secures freedom for Sirius."

"Sirius!" Regulus spat out in surprise. "He's *Sirius* now? When did that happen?"

"Well," his brother answered. "We found ourselves in a Sirius sit...."

"Don't!" Regulus, Snape, and Harry all said at the same time.

Somewhat nervously, Neville raised his hand as if he were back in school. "Um, I know I'm... well, the newest member, I guess, and also a kid. But ... I ... I had the choice to let Bellatrix Lestrange die earlier today. And ... um, I didn't. Let her die, I mean. I think all of you are incredibly heroic for what you're trying to do to stop You-Know-Who. But ... I don't think we should just ... kill them! I mean, we're *the good guys*, aren't we?"

"Speaking as a retired auror and self-described *good guy*," Buck added, "I have to say I agree. Rusty, I mean, Regulus here persuaded me to help you folks out, and I've been happy to do so. But I didn't sign up for vigilante executions."

"Nor did I," Rufus added. "During the war, I used the Killing Curse three times. And there is a part of me that will

forever regret that fact and the accompanying loss of a part of my humanity. That the people I killed in battle were vile fiends who deserved a Dementor's Kiss does not change that regret. And I also know that before the Ministry sanctioned use of the Unforgiveables by Aurors, there were none among us who betrayed their oaths to join the Death Eaters. *After* the Aurors were permitted to kill Death Eaters on sight, there were more than a dozen who were seduced by the thought of using such dark curses at will and joined the very terrorist group they were supposed to be fighting. I would find another solution."

"*What* other solution?!" Augusta said angrily. "That they are all deserving of death is without question. And while they live, they are a threat not just to us but to the whole Wizarding world! Or does anyone here doubt that Bellatrix Lestrange would have immediately gone to claim the very Cup we seek and used it to resurrect He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!"

Harry coughed softly. "Can I propose a compromise?"

Lucius laughed. "You offer a compromise ... between *life and death*?"

"Well, sort of." Harry turned towards Regulus and Buck. "How exactly does Death of Personality work?"

Both of them were surprised by the question, but Regulus deferred to his father-in-law's explanation.

"Death of Personality was created by the Australian government decades ago to free Aurors from both the ethical problems and soul damage that arose from acting as state executioners. Instead of killing criminals outright, their minds would be erased completely, their appearances would be permanently altered, and they would be given

new memories and false identities before being reintegrated in society to serve as productive citizens."

"What magic is used?" Sirius asked curiously.

"It's a multi-stage process," Regulus answered. "The first step is the Tabula Rasa Curse which acts by totally erasing the subject's memories and also eliminating his capacity to make new ones. Then, his body is permanently altered through an advanced variant of Polyjuice Potion combined with human Transfiguration effects. False memories are implanted with Legilimency, and the subject is hit with a spell that partially reverses the Tabula Rasa, allowing him to make new memories going forward but without restoring any of the lost ones. Normally, false memories would be detectable with a Remembrall, but since the subject *doesn't have any* when those memories are implanted, they don't show up as fake. It is a complex procedure though. The whole process usually takes several months."

"I do not wish for this affair to continue for *several months*," Augusta said archly.

"Well, it doesn't have to," Harry said. "It sounds like the Tabula Rasa Curse alone would be enough to remove any possibility of the Death Eaters escaping, let alone being a danger to anyone or eventually ratting us out. Plus, doesn't the Ministry already think that there's some connection between the Azkaban break-out and the Memory Charm used on Gilderoy Lockhart?"

Buck nodded. "Yeah, they do indeed. I've been trying to push that theory on James Potter since I got here – that the people who did the break-out were Muggleborns from some other country who went after Death Eaters for revenge. If at some point those same Death Eaters show back up with

total mind wipes, that might help sell it even better if we can handle it right, as well as solve your fears of them getting away from you in the meantime."

He grinned at Harry. "You're a clever little larrikin, ain't ya."

Harry blinked at the unfamiliar slang. "... thanks?"

Buck paused and frowned. "It will have to be Rusty who does it, though. I'm still under the Auror's Oath to never use the spell except on a magistrate's writ, nor tell anyone else how to cast it. But this sneaky little blighter found a way around that."

"Rusty?" Sirius asked in confusion.

"He means me, Sirius," Regulus said in a tired voice. "I'll explain later."

"One question," Snape asked. "Augustus Rookwood is believed to be a 7th-level Occlumens and a 7th-level Legilimens. Are you sure this spell can affect him?"

"Who cares?" Lucius asked. "Unlike the others, Rookwood has never seen any of us. We will use the spell on him just to be safe, but we won't even wake him up or remove his mask." He laughed. "I hope the fiend remembers nothing at all save that insipid tune that's been playing in his ear for over four months."

"Does anyone object to this course of action?" Rufus asked. For a moment, Augusta frowned almost angrily, but she said nothing.

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***Thirty minutes later ...***

Regulus stood over Bellatrix's prone and unconscious body with a somber expression. After everything she'd done, after all the lives she'd ruined, Bellatrix was still family, and he was, in a certain sense, about to execute her. Her body would live on and, according to most wizarding theories, her soul as well. But everything that made her "Bella" for good or ill was about to be erased from existence.

Buck stood to his left to provide moral support and Sirius to his right, standing in as Lord of House Black to informally sanction Regulus's actions against a family member. He had already performed the first stage of the Tabula Rasa ritual on the Lestrange brothers with predictable results. Both men sat in their respective cells, still in chains, but virtually lobotomized. They could still speak and respond to questions (though with few answers to give), but if someone talked with them and left the room, neither brother would remember anything nor even recognize the other speaker when he returned even a moment later. Both were complete amnesiacs, and neither would be able to form any new long-term memories until the second half of the ritual was performed, assuming it ever was.

Now, it was Bellatrix's turn.

With a gesture from Regulus's wand, the gag and blindfold around the woman vanished, and she gave a feral snarl when she saw who was standing over her.

"*Regulus! Sirius!* Blood traitor *filth* both of you!" she spat. "When my Lord returns, you will both feel his wrath!"

"Maybe, cousin," said Sirius in a flat voice. "But you won't be around to see it." He looked to his younger brother and nodded.



Regulus raised his wand and pierced Bellatrix with a steely gaze, as if he were a judge ready to pronounce sentence.

"Bellatrix Lestrangle, know that this is not done out of anger or cruelty or a need for revenge, but on behalf of your many victims who cry out for justice to be meted out upon you. I know that the path you have walked was perhaps not one of your choosing, and if we can, we will avenge the person you were before you fell under the Dark Lord's power. But for the person you are *now*, that path has reached its end. **TABULA RASA.**"

As he cast the spell, Regulus made an incredibly complicated wand movement that ended with a bolt of blue light shooting out of his wand to strike Bellatrix. Instantly, she screamed as that same blue light seemed to burst from her eyes and mouth, illuminating the room. After a few seconds, her scream abruptly died off, though the sound of her heavy exhausted breathing could still be heard.

Then, the woman who had been Bellatrix Lestrangle (aka Miss Demeanor), Lord Voldemort's right hand, slowly opened her eyes to look once more at the three men standing above her. She blinked repeatedly, and her brow furrowed in confusion.

"Regulus? Sirius?" she asked in puzzlement. "When did you get so ... *old*?"

The three men stared down at her in shock and surprise.

"... okay," said Buck. "This is ... *new*."

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The trio left Bellatrix guarded by both Hoskins and Dobby before returning to the dining room to announce the results. Much shouting ensued. Then, Severus Snape

grudgingly descended to examine Bellatrix psychically. After several minutes of study (followed by a lengthy conversation with the woman, who seemed confused and also quite frightened to find herself bound and restrained in a dungeon), Snape raised his wand towards her.

**"*LEGILIMENS!*"**

This foray into Bellatrix's mind was much less dramatic than his last one. He withdrew from her mind after less than two minutes before returning to his co-conspirators to make his report.

"Bellatrix Lestrangle ... is gone. As is Miss Demeanor. Bellatrix *Black*, however, remains. She has a great deal of *empirical* knowledge of matters ranging from dueling techniques to Death Eater command structure to ... '*how best to please Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrangle*.'" His expression at that last topic hinted at how distasteful he found those memories.

"But the core memories, the memories that she accepts as her own and make her the person she is ... those memories stop sometime just after her 18th birthday. For all practical purposes, she is an 18-year-old girl in the body of a 43-year old woman whose body is suffering the physical aftereffects of twelve or so years in Azkaban. And whatever she knows about the intervening period consists solely of information she learned through osmosis from co-existing with the artificial personality created to control her. She has no emotional context for anything that she did or that was done to her during that gap of roughly a quarter-century."

Rufus frowned. "What is the distinction between Bellatrix Lestrangle and Bellatrix Black? I know Miss Demeanor was a false personality created by Rookwood's damnable text,

but if the Lestrage persona isn't real either, where did it come from?"

"As part of her indoctrination process," Snape explained, "Rookwood inserted the psychic matrix for Miss Demeanor and also over time created a copy of the true personality that would be more malleable and loyal to the Dark Lord. This would allow Miss Demeanor to convincingly pose as Bellatrix without acting noticeably out of character when in the presence of people who knew her well but who did not know of her newfound allegiance. When such deceptions became necessary, Miss Demeanor would recede and the copy would take over."

"Why a copy though?" asked Sirius. "I'd have assumed that Miss Demeanor could exercise direct control over the real Bella."

The Potions Master shrugged. "I still do not know enough about Rookwood's techniques to say for certain. Perhaps he created a malleable copy of the true Bellatrix because he feared that allowing the real one any degree of autonomy would create an escalating danger of her breaking free. So instead she was bound deep within her own subconscious while a completely subservient copy remained in control of their shared body when Miss Demeanor's skills weren't needed."

"And then, Azkaban drove the copy insane while leaving the original untouched but bound within her own mind," said Rufus with a thoughtful expression.

Snape nodded. "Yes. Apparently, artificial personalities – or at least those of Miss Demeanor's generation – are somewhat fragile and can disintegrate if exposed to significant psychic damage such as from the long-term

presence of Dementors. So to protect itself, the Miss Demeanor persona receded deep into their shared subconscious, allowing the false Bellatrix to bear the brunt of Azkaban. The false Bellatrix, who we can call Bellatrix *Lestrange* to avoid confusion, went mad there and developed a host of derangements centering on adoration of the Dark Lord and his philosophy. But both Miss Demeanor and the true Bellatrix Black (who had been already supplanted by the false copy prior to her marriage) endured mostly intact. Well, until today, at least."

"What do you mean '*those of Miss Demeanor's generation*,' Professor?" Neville hesitantly inquired.

Snape frowned. "From the memories I observed within her mind – which by the way now have Occlumency shields less developed than those of young Mr. Potter here so I have no reason to doubt their veracity – Augustus Rookwood repeatedly and proudly referred to Bellatrix Lestrange as '*a successful prototype*.' His implication was that before his capture, he had improved on the process in some way or at least was working to do so."

"What does that mean?" Harry asked.

"I do not know," the man said solemnly. "But in the worst-case scenario, potentially anyone you meet might actually be an agent of Rookwood and of the Dark Lord *and not even know it*."

Everyone at the table practically shivered at that prospect.

"Let us set aside our worries about the unknown," Lady Augusta said firmly, "and return to the matter at hand. What are we to do about Bellatrix ... Black, I suppose?"

"Well, if it comes down to it, Lady Augusta, if Bellatrix is still a loyal Death Eater, I can just try the Tabula Rasa again," said Regulus. "But I'm uncomfortable using it on someone who is, by most ethical standards, innocent."

"Your ethics didn't do poor Gilderoy Lockhart much good, did they?" Lucius inquired. Regulus shrugged.

"True, but by that point I was 100% certain that he had committed crimes for which he would have received Death of Personality back in Australia and a life sentence in Azkaban here in Britain. And before today, that is the *only* time I have used that spell since leaving the Australian Auror Corps."

"It seems to me," Rufus began, "that a unique opportunity has fallen into our laps. While free of her alternate personalities, Bellatrix Black is still a font of information about You-Know-Who, not just about his horcruxes, but his entire operation. Whatever we ultimately choose to do with the woman, whether another mind-wipe, simple execution, or some other option, might I respectfully ask that it wait until after we have debriefed her? By Veritaserum, if necessary?"

"Perhaps," said Harry, "we could start by, I dunno, *asking her?*"

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Fifteen minutes later and after still more shouting, Bellatrix Black sat before the assembled group, each member of which save the two minors had a wand trained on her just in case. Harry and Neville's wands had been put away since the two students were thought to be the ones most vulnerable to a wandless Accio Wand from the erstwhile assassin. Privately, Harry thought he'd like to see

someone *try* to beat him with that particular spell, but he kept that bit of self-confidence to himself.

In any event, the precautions seemed unnecessary. The haughty and calculating Miss Demeanor was gone, and so was the insane and hysterical Bellatrix Lestrange. All that remained was a deeply traumatized 18-year-old in a body twice that age and who seemed to still be in a state of shock at her condition. Her strongest reaction since being struck with the Tabula Rasa was when she passed by a large mirror as she was being led to the dining room.

She *screamed* at the sight of herself, and Snape had to give her a Calming Draught. Snape sat on one side of her and Regulus on the other.

"Why don't you just tell us what you remember, Bellatrix?" Sirius said gently.

She twitched slightly at the sound of being addressed and slowly rubbed her left arm. After a moment of concentration, she began her tale.

Late in her Seventh Year, Bellatrix's baby sister, Narcissa Black, had given her a certain book as an early graduation present. Bellatrix aspired to become an Auror. But while her grades were adequate and her dueling skills superb, she had been unable to develop more than rudimentary Occlumency defenses and feared the skill was beyond her.

"Cissy," however, assured her that ***Occlumency: A Beginner's Guide*** would help her achieve her goals. At the time, she was grateful, for she and Narcissa had quarreled for months about politics and about Cissy's increasingly obsessive interest in the extremist group then known as the Knights of Walpurgis.

Bellatrix's first year after Hogwarts was to be a gap year, and she spent several months of it diligently reading through the book. The increasingly uncontrollable rages were troubling at first, but the book said that was normal, and she believed it wholeheartedly. Certainly, her growing proficiency at Occlumency was a great boon to her NEWTS – she passed seven with four Outstandings. By October, she was only just growing concerned about the strange gaps in her memory, but by then, it was already too late. Just before Christmas, Narcissa came into her room and idly asked if she still had no interest in joining the Death Eaters. She remembered a strange feeling of dislocation, as if part of her was still sitting on her bed while another part had just been pushed off a cliff and had never stopped falling. And she remembered a voice that sounded like her own proudly exclaiming that she would become the greatest of the Dark Lord's servants. After that, nothing.

"You truly remember nothing of the last *quarter-century*?" Rufus asked pointedly.

Immediately, Bellatrix nearly burst into tears at the sudden realization of just how long it had been, how much of her life had been stolen away. Snape gave her another Calming Draught, and she collected herself.

"I ... I don't *remember* what happened," she began. "But I *know* much of what happened. I just ... wasn't *there* for it. It was like a long and vivid dream that I continue to recall clearly even after waking up." She shuddered. "A long, violent, frightening ... and occasionally *disturbingly erotic* dream."

She focused her attention on Augusta and Neville. "I know you both must despise me for what I ... what *she* did here in this very house. But ... *that wasn't me!*" Tears flowed down

her cheeks as she spoke, and she went back to absentmindedly rubbing her arm.

For his part, Neville seemed genuinely moved by Bellatrix's contrition. Augusta less so.

"Let us pass over denials and apologies for now, Madam Lestrange...."

"*Black!*" she spat out. "I would *never* have married that ... *monster* if it hadn't been for ...."

"Miss Black, then," Augusta interrupted without concern for her outburst. "The fact remains that you are a wanted criminal who we have removed from Azkaban at great risk to ourselves. Unless you have something of value to bargain with, we shall resume our deliberations as to whether to try once again to erase your personality or simply to stick with what works and *kill you!*"

"GRAN!" Neville exclaimed, as Bellatrix clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a cry of anguish. Most of the others around the table seemed equally uncomfortable with Augusta's bloodthirstiness, though Lucius seemed to take it in stride. Bellatrix closed her eyes and then took a deep breath. When she opened them again, she looked back at Augusta defiantly.

"I do have things to offer," she said slowly. "For one thing, I can get you *the Cup*."

"What do you know of that?" Snape said quickly.

"What do *you* know of it, Severus? I know it is the key to bringing the Dark Lord back from the dead. I know because he told me. No, told *her*." She sighed. "I can see that pronouns are going to be difficult," she muttered.



The others looked at one another in surprise at this development.

"So, You-Know-Who told you about his horcruxes?" Snape asked.

"Well, he didn't use that name for it. He just summoned me and presented me with the Cup and said I was to treasure it more than my own life. That it was the key to his immortality. It seemed there was a prophecy that had been uttered about him, and while he was confident of being able to overcome it, the Cup was one of his contingency plans for defeating Death itself. I was to hide it away under the best protections I could devise, and if he ever disappeared without contact for more than a week at any point, I was to reclaim the Cup and get Rodolphus to drink a potion from it."

"What potion?" Snape asked.

She shrugged. "Any potion. He said it didn't matter so long as Rodolphus drank something magical from the Cup and kept drinking from it until ... well, until I could see the results. I think now that his intention was to possess Rodolphus's body or else consume his soul to fuel a resurrection spell of some kind. He said if my ... my *loving husband* wasn't available, then I was to use any male wizard I could find. But I had served him faithfully, and so sacrificing my husband for his resurrection would be my reward. A merry widowhood in exchange for services rendered, I suppose."

She sniffed disdainfully. "After Boruslav's death, I don't think he cared much about Rabastan and Rodolphus." From her expression, she didn't care much for the Lestrangle Brothers either.

"Did he mention any other ... objects?" asked Lucius.

"Not to me, but I do recall overhearing your father bragging about how the Dark Lord had entrusted him with a diary of some kind. A trophy that had once belonged to some Muggleborn that Abraxas knew and hated from their school days who the Dark Lord had murdered. And Rookwood mentioned that Erasmus Wilkes and Boruslav Lestrangle had helped with the defenses for other items, but since they were both dead by that point, I would be solely responsible for protecting the Cup. That's why I just took it to Gringotts and paid the price to upgrade my vault to maximum security. I don't know any more about any other objects beyond that."

"Is that all you have to tell us about horcruxes, woman?" Augusta said with a glare. "For that matter, do you have any information that we cannot simply *take* with Veritaserum and Legilimency?"

"Lady Augusta," said Rufus firmly. "Please restrain yourself. I understand the reason for your strong emotions. But killing Bellatrix Lestrangle would not have brought your son and daughter-in-law back. And killing Bellatrix Black certainly won't either."

Before Augusta could respond, Bellatrix spoke up again, more forcefully. "I do have more than mere information to barter with. As I said, I can *get you* the Cup. I have the means to bypass its defenses with ease. I can simply walk into my vault at Gringotts and bring it straight back."

"Unnecessary!" Augusta spat angrily. "With Legilimency and Veritaserum, we can get all the information we need about your vault's defenses."

Bellatrix shook her head. "You don't need Legilimency or Veritaserum. I'll happily tell you what I know about those defenses. In addition to a number of deadly Goblin-designed traps hidden around the room, the entire vault is covered with a combination Flagrante-Gemino Curse.

Touch *anything* in the vault and it will immediately start to multiply while also giving off intense deadly heat. It will be a race to see if you're crushed to death before you burn to death. And that doesn't even get into the defenses the Goblins have put in place before you even get to the vault."

"But you can bypass these defenses?" Harry asked.

"It's not even a matter of bypassing them," she replied. "The vault is keyed to my biomagical signature. Those defensives simply don't affect me while I'm there. And the Gringotts treaties obligate them to allow me safe passage to my own vault even if I am, as you say, an escaped convict."

"Regulus...?" Augusta began.

"I know what your going to ask, Augusta, but it's no good. Metamorphmagery can't' fool biomagical sensors."

"You're a Meta...." Bellatrix began before stopping and shaking her head. "Never mind. Just one more thing I missed out on."

"So you will agree to help us by reclaiming the Cup?" Sirius asked.

She was silent for a moment as she considered the implications. "I would want ... assurances."

Augusta snorted at that, but Rufus ignored her. "What kind of assurances?"

"That I won't be *killed* after I've done it, obviously! That or put back under Draught of Living Death forever or just sent back to Azkaban, this time with my own mind suffering rather than that of an intruder." She grimaced at the thought and clutched at her arm again, though only Harry noticed. "Or anything else that I suspect Lady Longbottom would do to me for revenge if given a chance!"

The elder woman practically snarled at that, but Bellatrix ignored her and addressed the room. "I want an Unbreakable Vow or something at least as strong that says if I deliver the Cup to you, you will help me escape Britain with the resources and means to start over somewhere else."

Augusta shot out of her chair in a rage and pointed her wand straight at Bellatrix. 'HOW DARE YOU! HOW DARE YOU SIT IN THE VERY ROOM WHERE YOU TORTURED MY GRANDSON'S PARENTS TO MADNESS AND *MAKE DEMANDS OF US!*'

"GRAN!" shouted Neville. "STOP IT!"

By this point, everyone else had a wand pointed in some direction, but no one knew who to stun.

"SHE HAS TO *DIE*, NEVILLE! DIE FOR WHAT SHE DID!"

"I *know* what she did, Gran!" the boy shouted crossly.

"Remember, *I go visit them every Christmas too!*"

She turned on Neville in a fury, though her wand never strayed from pointing at Bellatrix's head.

"Then how can you defend her, Neville?! How could you have saved her earlier when her death was at hand?! What would your father say to you if he were here now?!"

Neville swallowed and licked his lips. "Well," he began tentatively and quietly, "I would *hope* that he would say that he didn't want his Mum to become a *murderess*."

Utter silence fell across the entire room. Augusta looked as if she'd been slapped. She said nothing, just stared at her grandson with her mouth hanging open. Then, she abruptly fled the room uttering a quick sob as she passed out the door.

Neville grimaced and rose from his chair. "If you'll excuse me for a moment." He followed his grandmother out of the room while the other conspirators looked at one another in amazement.

Outside, Neville found the old witch down the hall with her hand leaning on a wall to support herself. She was weeping openly.

"Gran," Neville began softly. "I'm sorry. I know how you feel about all this. But you've always told me that I'm expected to live up to my father's standards. Well, I have to believe that Frank Longbottom would have been someone who put justice ahead of revenge. Someone who ...."

Before he could say anymore, Augusta turned around and pulled him into a hug. "Shhh, Neville. Don't speak. Just ... hold me for a moment." She sniffed loudly. "Honestly, Neville, you are so much like your father that it's utterly unnerving at times."

Neville smiled and hugged back. "Thank you."

She sniffed. "Don't thank me, Neville. It wasn't *entirely* a compliment."

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While the two Longbottoms stayed out in the hall to talk, Harry spoke up.

"Since they may be a while, Miss Black, there's something I wanted to ask while Lady Augusta was gone. Is there a problem with your arm?"

At that, everyone else finally noticed that the woman had been continuously rubbing her left forearm almost since the meeting had begun.

"Is it your Dark Mark, Bellatrix?" Snape asked cautiously.

She nodded. "It doesn't hurt, it just feels wrong. And it ... itches."

Snape rose and moved closer to her. "Show me."

Bellatrix peeled back her shirt sleeve and then gasped.

The Dark Mark was still there - a skull with a snake poking out of its mouth. Except now, the snake *was moving*. It slithered and crawled all over the woman's skin, into one eye-hole and out the other before circling behind and then coming out of the mouth again.

"Merlin," Snape said quietly while several of the others crowded around to see the ambulatory Dark Mark for themselves.

"What is *wrong* with it?!" Bellatrix whispered. Harry moved a little closer and leaned his head in. He could hear hissing, albeit very faint.

"It's frightened. Terrified. It says it's been ... '*cut off from the source*,' whatever that means."

"You can understand it?" Snape asked. Harry gave him a '*duh*' look and then remembered there were others observing, some of whom were staring at him in amazement.

"Yeah. By the way, I'm a Parselmouth. Please don't make a big fuss over it. And since I've told you all that during an official meeting, let me remind you that it's covered by your secrecy oaths."

Sirius shook his head. "Every day it's something new," he muttered.

"Harry," said Regulus. "Talk to it. Ask it .... You know, I don't even know what would be a good starting question to ask of a quasi-sentient tattoo. But see what you can learn."

Harry looked at Reg dubiously before shrugging lightly. He moved closer to Bellatrix and bent down to hiss directly at her Dark Mark. Those present who were unaware of Harry's Parseltongue were deeply unnerved by it. Those who were aware were only mildly unnerved by it. After a few minutes, he turned back to the group.

"Okay, it doesn't have a name, but I'm calling it *Mark* for the moment. Anyway, it's going crazy because its connection to the Speaker – who I assume is Voldemort – is gone." He looked over to Lucius and Snape. "I'm guessing that the Dark Mark has to be taken voluntarily, right? You can get tricked or blackmailed or otherwise forced to take it, but there has to be some sign from the person getting Marked that he's submitting to it freely for it to work properly."

Lucius and Severus were both uncomfortable with Harry's inquiries, but they both agreed with his assessment. In fact, House Malfoy had paid a substantial sum of money for an expert opinion that one *could* be forced to take the Dark

Mark by the Imperius or even a Confundus, which he and Snape both knew to be categorically false. Someone who was manipulated into taking the Dark Mark or even someone who took it under false pretenses, such as a person planning to spy on the Death Eaters could still be bound by the Mark's power. But someone who took the Dark Mark under duress, unwittingly, or as a result of magical mental influence of any kind would simply gain an ugly irremovable tattoo with no other magical properties.

"Well," Harry said, "the person who consented to take *this* Mark was Miss Demeanor, and she's gone now. The Mark is presently attached to the body of someone who didn't submit to it, and so there's no longer an oath-based connection to ... well, whatever magic Voldemort used to create the Dark Mark. Do either of you know anything about how the Mark functions?"

Both former Death Eaters shook their heads.

"I spent years studying my own Mark to see if there was a way to remove it," Snape said. "I never found one."

"Likewise," Lucius added.

"Okay, well, apparently it's not just a single tattoo. It's part of a *network* of magical tattoos that are all connected spiritually. And *this* Mark is now cut off from that network. It thinks it may be dying. Whatever that might mean for a tattoo, anyway."

Bellatrix brightened. "Does that mean it might disappear?"

Harry thought about that and then hissed some more at the tattoo. A second later, he looked up.



"Um, it says ... well, it's hard to translate from snake to human, but I think it says that if we don't find a way to save it, it will take *you* with it when it ceases to exist."

Her eyes widened.

"It's possible that it's bluffing," he added cautiously.

"Magical snake tattoos ... can *bluff*?!" Sirius asked incredulously.

Harry shrugged helplessly at the question. But then, Bellatrix let out a sudden gasp of pain. The Mark had come to rest in a new configuration. It now looked as though it were wrapped tightly around her forearm just below the skull. And it seemed to be squeezing tightly. The woman gritted her teeth tightly and started banging her arm on the table in frustration. Harry was closest, and acting on instinct, he grabbed her arm to hold it down before she hurt herself.

And *that* was when it happened. In a blur of motion, the snake darted down Bellatrix's forearm *and then crossed from her skin to Harry's before slithering up onto his arm.*

"GAAAAAAAH!" Harry screamed as he released the woman's arm and backed away, shaking his arm wildly as he moved. "GET IT OFF! GET IT OFF! GET IT OFF!"

"Harry!" Sirius called out excitedly. "Are you okay?!"

"NO I'M NOT OKAY! I'VE GOT PART OF A BLOODY DARK MARK ON MY ARM!" he bellowed in a mix of terror and fury.

"*Be at peace, Speaker,*" came a soft hiss somehow coming from inside his mind. "*I will not harm you. I am cut off from*

*the source, but you shall be my new source. And I will obey you as I did my maker."*

"What?! What?!" Harry exclaimed. Then, he looked up at the others who were all staring at him in horror. "It says it wants to obey me! What do I do!"

"First of all, Potter," said Snape with authority, "you will calm down at once. You are nearly a 4th degree Occlumens. This shouting and hysteria is unseemly and avails you nothing."

"Yes, Harry," Lucius added. "Remember Salazar's words. *Unbridled emotion is the enemy of cunning and the foe of ambition.*"

Harry glowered at the two men before closing his eyes and finding his center. His heartrate and breathing calmed, and he began to listen to the soft sibilant voice in his head.

"Okay," he thought, *"you say you want to obey me. So how do I get you off of me?"*

*"I cannot answer that, Master. Both because I do not wish to leave you and because I do not know how. It seems that I can only survive on the skin of one who has accepted me freely or ... one such as you."*

"What do you mean - one such as me? What, a Parselmouth?"

*"I suppose so, Master. I do not understand it myself. But the fact that you, like my creator, are a Speaker of the Founder's Sacred Tongue is a likely explanation given my serpentine aspect. I truly do not know how to remove myself from you, Master. But if you will tolerate my presence, I will strive to be worthy of your forbearance. I*

*know things about the servants of my creator that I can share."*

*"Like what?"* Harry thought cautiously.

*"I can sense the hidden presence of others of my kind. If you did not already know, I can tell you that the ones called Severus Snape and Lucius Malfoy both bear marks of their own."*

*"... um, okay? Can their marks sense you?"*

*"No, they are dormant, and even when active, they lack the capacity for initiative. They are still connected to the creator via the skull emblem. I have been freed from that connection and believe I am no longer visible to the other Marks. In any case, the creator did not make it a habit to spy on his marked servants through their Marks."*

Harry blinked nervously. *"He could do that?"* he asked cautiously. *"What else could he do to his followers through their marks?"*

Harry stood still for quite a while as the others simply stared at him in confusion. Then, he opened his eyes and focused his gaze on Snape and Malfoy. They both noticed at once that he'd gone pale.

*"Um, Professor Snape? Mr. Malfoy? Do you ... Did you know ...?"*

*"Know what, Potter?"* Lucius snapped. *"Out with it already."*

Harry swallowed. *"Were either of you aware of the fact that your Dark Marks have kill switches in them? That Voldemort can kill any of his marked followers at any time?"*

He paused as if listening to a clarification that only he could hear as both men looked at him in shock and horror.

"Well, not *any* time," Harry continued. "He doesn't have a body right now, and he has to touch a Dark Mark – his own or someone else's – to do anything with the Dark Mark network. But if he overcomes that problem, he can eavesdrop on any of your conversations and also ... basically kill you instantly whenever he wants."

Both men stood speechless. Finally, Lucius spoke.

"Well, thank you for that insight, Mr. Potter. You've just given me an even greater incentive to see that my former master never regains physical form. And you've also ensured that I won't be falling asleep again tonight."

At that point, Neville and Augusta entered the room.

"We heard shouting," the boy said. "Is everything alright?"

"Oh, just spiffing, Nev," Harry said sarcastically as he rolled up his arm to reveal his new tattoo. "I'm thirteen-and-a-half years old, and I've apparently just taken the Dark Mark! Like my father needs a new excuse to disown me!"

After the initial furor over that development died down, the group spent some time discussing the implications of Harry's new friend. Harry was not able to affect the Dark Marks of Snape or Malfoy, unfortunately, but on the bright side, that seemed to confirm that Mark was truly independent of Voldemort and thus posed no danger to Harry or the rest of them. Also, unlike the normal Dark Marks, Harry's tattoo was fully ambulatory and could move anywhere on his body according to his mental commands. After some experimentation, he finally had Mark slither up his arm and then down his back before curving into an "S"

shape resembling the one found on Salazar Slytherin's family crest. Harry said that it itched mildly whenever Mark moved but had no adverse side effects. Finally, both Snape and Scrimgeour agreed that they would regularly monitor Harry for the next several months to ensure that "Mark" did not pose any kind of threat to the boy, though they were forced to admit that they had no practical ideas on what to do if it did.

Meanwhile, Bellatrix took the time to examine the skull part of her Mark that remained on her arm, and she was delighted when the ink flaked away at her touch. Neville quickly summoned Hoskins with a wet towel, and the rest of her Mark quickly and easily washed off. Her pleasure at the fact that she was no longer in any sense a Death Eater was offset by the knowledge that Lucius and Severus both still had metaphorical serpent-shaped swords hanging over their heads.

With the matter of Dark Marks and the people who carried them resolved for the moment, the group resumed their deliberations about Bellatrix's offer. It took an hour of debate and wrangling, but the conspirators finally came up with wording for an oath that Bellatrix found agreeable. The other three Azkaban inmates would remain in the dungeon for the time being once Regulus cast the Tabula Rasa on Augustus Rookwood (who would nevertheless remain bound, comatose, and forced to listen to "Tip-toe Through the Tulips" ad infinitum). Bellatrix would move to 12 Grimmauld Place for recuperation until she was in good enough shape to recover the Cup, and during her convalescence, Rufus and several others would continue to debrief her about what she remembered about her (or rather Miss Demeanor's) time serving Voldemort.

In fact, Augusta had insisted on her relocation. "I'm sorry," she said. "I promised Neville I would try to be understanding and even forgiving. But I simply cannot promise that I won't Crucio her if I meet her in the hallway unexpectedly."

After Bellatrix's debriefing was complete and the Cup secured and destroyed, the group would make arrangements to get her out of the country. At present, the most likely destination was Australia, as Buck claimed he "knew people" who could get her a new face and a new name without the Australian Ministry or Auror Corps finding out. Those conspirators not involved with Bellatrix's activities would brainstorm on how to turn Rabastan, Rodolphus, and Rookwood over to the authorities without getting caught and in such a way that would exonerate Sirius. That last goal seemed impossible to Harry at this point, but Scrimgeour said he had a few ideas on the subject that would have to wait until school resumed.

"Well, I think that's everything," Lucius said. "And I really need to return to Paris before Draco awakens and finds me missing. Are there any other matters to discuss?"

"Just one," said Sirius who had been unusually quiet for some time. He leaned forward in Harry's direction with a profoundly troubled expression on his face.

"Harry, has James Potter actually tried to ... *disown* you?"

Harry sighed and rubbed his eyes before answering. "Priorities, Sirius. Priorities."

## Chapter End Notes

What The Sinister Man is reading: "The Imposter Complex" by Notus Oren, a surprisingly enjoyable read

in which the Diary Tom Riddle survives and escapes Hogwarts only to be shocked and horrified by what his older self has been up to since 1945. "Extradition Escape" by Tangerine-Alert, an expansion of T-A's earlier "Extradition Challenges." Both deal with the idea of Harry taking a runner rather than compete in the TWT, though the first version was two chapters and about 6500 redo is already eight chapters and 45k and hasn't covered all of the first chapter of 'Extradition Challenges" yet.

AN1: The back-cover description for Strangers In Boston:

Sometimes, when you encounter something strange, you have a choice to make. Ignore it and put it out of your mind? Or acknowledge it, and perhaps become a little bit stranger yourself from the experience? But sometimes, if you see something VERY strange, the choice is more serious and the outcomes more severe. Do you ignore the sight of something that violates the natural order and hope it doesn't kill you in your willful blindness? Or do you accept the truth of what you've seen and, in the process, become something TRULY strange. So strange that you fall out of the world you knew, forgotten completely by family and friends. Your house key no longer fits the lock. Your Driver's License is now just a blank plastic card. You have unwillingly become a citizen of a hidden realm of magic and horror, one visible to normal people only out of the corner of the eye. You have become a Stranger.

Matt Sullivan, an ordinary high-school jock from Boston, had such an encounter when he and his brother Luke crossed paths with an insane Lovecraft-quoting witch who tried to sacrifice them for an evil, nearly

incomprehensible purpose. Matt survived, but as a result, he "went strange" and immediately found himself lost in a new and frightening world. A world where his own mother doesn't recognize him anymore. Where enigmatic techno-mages scheme and plan in their hidden base beneath MIT, while sword-wielding magical inquisitors prowl the streets with a "stab first, question later" philosophy. Where the mysterious "Wizard of Fenway" holds secrets that will change Matt's life forever. And where the same mad cultist responsible for Matt's strangeness still holds his brother Luke captive and plans to use him to attack Reality itself. But it's also a world where Matt, to his amazement, has actual magical powers at his command ... provided they don't kill him or drive him insane before he can master them.

Strangers In Boston is the first book in T.S. Mann's Tales of a Strange World series.



# Families at Christmas

## Chapter Notes

### SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and allegories about tolerance. Instead, it's more straight-up horror with a dash of comedy. Oh, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

***Harry Potter  
and the Death Eater Menace***

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***Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling I make no claim to ownership.***

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## ***CHAPTER 32: Families at Christmas***

**19 December 1993  
The Weasley Burrow  
5:00 p.m.**

With a flash of green fire, nearly the entire Weasley family spilled out of the Burrow's fireplace, having traveled from Kings Cross to the Leaky Cauldron via the Knight Bus. (Molly absolutely refused to take the bus all the way to Ottery St. Catchpole.) George and Fred were the last to pass through, and they bumped into each other as they did. This led to matching sullen glares, but Percy smoothly stepped between them before their parents noticed (and before *another* shoving match broke out – the one on the train had been bad enough). The twins quickly separated and moved to opposite sides of the living room.

Only Bill and Charlie were absent, but according to Arthur, both would be home by Christmas Eve. And for the first time that any of them could recall, that Christmas would be celebrated at the Burrow. For years, it had been Molly and Arthur's policy to leave their children at school for the holiday break because the traditional Hogwarts feast was far better than anything they could have provided on Arthur's meager salary. In fact, in years past, those children too young for Hogwarts would be taken to see their Aunt Muriel on Christmas Day, and while the food was good, it did not make up for the company of the bitter old witch who wasn't shy about pointing out every perceived defect in their entire family.

And so it was that the five school-aged Weasley children (plus two older siblings supposedly on the way) were quite surprised when they received word from their parents: this year, the Weasleys would all celebrate Christmas together for the first time in any of their lives. And all five were suitably shocked at the festive decorations which included the largest Christmas tree any of them had ever seen outside of Hogwarts. Ron, as was his nature, ignored the tree and headed over towards the kitchen, attracted as he was by the smell of his mother's cooking.

"Wow!" Ginny exclaimed in wonder at the decorations. Then, her eyes widened even more at the sight of boxes and boxes of presents beneath the tree. "Who are all those for?" she asked.

"Well, they're for you lot, of course!" her father said jovially. She gaped at him in surprise, as Arthur continued.

"You see your mother and I came into a bit of extra cash. Well, mainly your mum to be honest. And we talked it over and decided that since we could finally afford it, we would treat you all to a *proper* Christmas!"

"Mainly ... Mum?" Percy asked almost suspiciously.

Molly blushed. "Well, it's a funny story. You see ...."

Ron interrupted loudly from the kitchens. "Mum? Why are there five dozen Christmas puddings in the kitchen?"

"Ronald Bilius Weasley! she yelled back. "Do not touch anything in there! Those are for paying customers!"

"You have ... customers?" George asked cautiously.

She sighed. "All of you, come and sit down, and I'll tell you everything."

The whole family crowded onto the living room sofas and looked at her expectantly (except for Arthur who knew the whole story and simply beamed at her in pride).

"Do you all remember," she began, "summer before last when Harry Potter stayed with us for a few days, and he gave me that cookbook as a present?" Everyone nodded.

"Well, after Ginny started schooling, I found that I had a lot of free time, so I started cooking things out of that book. Just experimenting, you understand." She chuckled. "I can't *believe* how many awful dishes I forced your father to eat while I was getting the hang of it."

"Now, now," Arthur chided. "Nothing was *awful*. I just ... liked some things better than others."

"Anyway," Molly continued, "that year, I only made something once every month or so. But then, your father got a raise at the end of last summer right after you all went back to school. Not much, but I could afford to buy more ingredients and I really started to feel more confident in my baking. So, this past September, just a few weeks after you all left for school, it was my turn to bring a dessert for the monthly Ottery St. Catchpole Ladies Gardening and Knitting Society. And instead of my usual chocolate brownies that I've made for ages and ages, I decided to be daring and bring a plate of *kremówka*."

"A plate of *what?!*" Fred exclaimed.

"Kremówka, dear," she repeated. "It's a Polish variation on *mille-feuille*."

"Oh," Percy said dazedly. "I'm glad we've got that cleared up."

"Well, anyway, my kremówka was a big hit with all the witches at the meeting, and I swear we spent more time talking about desserts than about gardening and knitting put together! Before it was all over, Lucinda Mayberry asked me if I would bake something for her godson's birthday party, and she *insisted* on paying me for it. Then, some of the other ladies didn't want to be outdone, and they started asking me to bake things for them and offering

more and more galleons to get first in line. Of course, things didn't really take off until Elspeth Diggory – that's Amos's mother, you probably haven't met her – asked me how much I would charge to do a wedding cake for her daughter Lucy – Lucy is Amos's baby sister; she lives in Wales, but she comes to watch Cedric when Hufflepuff plays, so you might have seen her there – but that's not important. What matters is, Elspeth wanted me to do a *four-tier* wedding cake for Lucy's wedding and asked me how much I would charge for that. And I had *no idea*! So, I told her I'd have to think about it and then sent an owl to Summerisles Catering and asked how much *they* would charge for something like that, and they sent me back a quote for *eighty galleons*! Well, I couldn't *imagine* myself charging anything like that even if I was a big-time hoidy-toidy catering service. I mean Elspeth is *a friend*. So, I said I'd do it for thirty galleons, *and she handed it to me on the spot!* Well, I was just a nervous wreck trying figure out what *I* could do that would be worth that much money. I finally decided on a lemon elderflower cake with both white fondant and lavender buttercream. I also sculpted these little white doves out of buttercream and enchanted them so that when someone cut into the cake they would fly around for a few seconds before coming back down again. Elspeth was thrilled, and I don't mind telling you I was quite proud of the finished result."

She finally paused to catch her breath as her children stared in amazement. "Anyway, to make a long story short ...."

"Too late," Fred muttered.

"Next thing I knew, I was getting two or three owls a week from people who wanted me to bake something for them. And that was *before* I started advertising!"

"*Advertising?!* " Percy spluttered.

"Not much," Molly answered defensively. "I just took out a small advert in *The Prophet* around the middle of November announcing that *Molly's Magical Morsels* was now taking orders for Christmas puddings at a low-low cost of only 3 galleons each. Next thing I know, I've got *over fifty orders* to fill! I've been running myself ragged."

Despite her words, Ginny didn't think Molly looked tired at all. If anything, she seemed livelier than the young witch ever remembered. Meanwhile, Percy closed his eyes as he suddenly found it difficult to do simple arithmetic.

"You've been paid ... *150 galleons* ... to make Christmas puddings?!" he finally exclaimed dazedly.

Molly looked up at the ceiling as if double-checking Percy's math. "For the puddings, yes. That doesn't count the six gingerbread houses I'm making with little gingerbread people who dance around and sing holiday songs until you bite their heads off. That's another 120 galleons for the month."

Arthur grinned merrily and pecked Molly on the cheek. "Sing until you bite their heads off! Isn't your mother wonderful!"

The five youngest Weasleys stared at their parents in silent amazement. Finally, Fred spoke up in a suspicious tone.

"So, I have to ask ... did you two finally decide to let us come home for Christmas because you're gonna need help filling those orders?"

"Fred!" Molly exclaimed. "We brought you home because Christmas is a time for families to be together."

Then, she blushed slightly. "Of course, since you're all here anyway ...."

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**22 December, 1993**  
**Granger Residence**  
**Crawley, London**

As Hermione Granger was finishing dinner with her parents, she was in a pleasant mood, better in fact than she'd been in for quite a while. While the past term at Hogwarts had been immensely stressful for a variety of reasons, Hermione felt at this point that she had made it through the worst of things. She'd even gotten a good report on her dental exam and cleaning earlier that day. The young witch had been quite worried about cavities due to all the chocolate that had been passed around for most of the Fall Term, but her father reported that her teeth were as perfect as ever.

Well, not *perfect*, since she still had a pronounced overbite. She'd been surprised when her father asked her at one point that afternoon whether wizards had any special magic to correct such conditions. Before she could answer, Dan Granger suddenly noticed the *look* that his wife Emma was giving him, and he quickly changed the subject. That was the only time magic had been mentioned in the Granger household since she'd gotten home beyond a vague report that classes were "going well."

Unfortunately, on this day, magic unexpectedly became a major topic of family conversation when an enormous horned owl landed at the dining room window and began to peck loudly at the glass. Emma let out a brief squeak of fright. While she had, for the most part, tried to stay open-minded about "the whole magic thing," Hermione's mother

had something of a phobia about birds. Especially very large raptors that landed on her windowsill and looked at her like she was a small and delicious woodland creature.

Cautiously, Hermione made her way to the window and opened it to admit the menacing bird. Dan followed her over, curious about the letter and the owl that had delivered it. He had expressed interest several times in purchasing an owl for his daughter, but Emma had always quietly but firmly vetoed the idea.

From the owl's leg, Hermione carefully withdrew a crème-colored envelope bearing an ornate family crest and addressed to her in stylish calligraphy. It was sealed with red-candle wax embossed with a large letter "P."

*"Parkinson,"* Hermione realized in wonder. *"Pansy Parkinson is ... what, sending me Christmas cards now?!"*

She looked up at her parents and did her best to look innocent, as if receiving such a dramatic delivery was nothing of any consequence.

"It's from one of my classmates," she said diplomatically before carefully opening the envelope and pulling out the vellum letter inside.

*To Miss Hermione Jean Granger*

*I bid you greetings on behalf of the Noble House of Parkinson. It has been many weeks since you acted to save my daughter Pansy from death at the talons of a ferocious beast. I would have expected some sort of public acknowledgement of the life debt owed to you by my house by now. But I do understand that you are Muggle-born and so allowances must be made for your ignorance of our culture and traditions. If your guardians are amenable, I*



*would meet with you in one week's time at noon on the 29<sup>th</sup> day of December at Summerisles in Diagon Alley to discuss arrangements for satisfying our debt to you. I am informed that my Pansy has been, shall we say, less than dignified in her past social interactions with you on account of your heritage. Alas, she is very young and is a product of the culture that raised her. As, to be blunt, am I. But some matters transcend considerations of blood and heritage, and for my family, the satisfaction of a life debt is one. However, if it will set your mind at ease, you may bring a chaperone of your choosing to this meeting. I would recommend someone other than your Muggle parents, however. I fear they might be overwhelmed by the solemnity of our negotiations which I wish to pursue with the utmost dignity, to say nothing of the opulence of Summerisles itself. I would not wish them to feel uncomfortable in an environment more sophisticated than they are accustomed. An RSVP card is enclosed. Please return it by my owl, Hekate. Until then, I remain*

*Cordially yours,*

*Andrew Lord Parkinson*

Hermione's eyes widened as she read the letter. In the months since she'd rescued Pansy from a potential mauling by Buckbeak the Hippogriff, she'd had almost no interactions with the bigoted Pureblood prima donna, and Hermione had practically forgotten about Harry Potter's suggestion that a life debt was owed over it. But now, Pansy's father (who was almost certainly a Muggle-hating Death Eater) wanted to meet with her to "negotiate" matters.

So distracted was she by the letter, that she didn't notice at first that her father was reading the letter over her

shoulder.

"Okay, sweetheart," he began. "I know your mother and I haven't been as '*hands on*' as perhaps we should have been since you started at Hogwarts. But that doesn't mean we should be kept in the dark. Now what is this business about you saving some girl from a *ferocious beast* and earning a *life debt* over it? And who is this pompous arse who thinks we should send our daughter to meet with him alone because as *mere Muggles* we might be *overwhelmed* by eating dinner with wizards?"

Hermione scrunched her eyes in frustration. She knew that tone of voice from her dad. It meant that for the moment at least, all her usual strategies of dissembling to her parents about what Hogwarts was really like would not work. "*Luckily, they never did find out about Quirrell or the Basilisk,*" she thought.

Minutes later, she had provided the elder Grangers with a heavily redacted account of the Buckbeak incident. How Pansy Parkinson, a foolish young witch, had ignored a teacher's instructions on how to handle a potentially dangerous creature. How Hermione had saved the girl with a magical spell. How Hermione herself had never been in any danger nor anyone else involved. How Hermione herself didn't think the girl herself had been in any real danger (a slight lie). How now, due to archaic social rules followed by Pureblood families, the House of Parkinson apparently had decided that it owed her some kind of debt to be repaid.

Dan Granger pinched the brow of his nose as he absorbed this information while at the table, Emma said nothing as she poured herself another glass of wine.

"Okay, pumpkin," he finally said. "Can I assume it would be a horrible social faux pas if we were either ignore Lord Whatshispants or write back that we weren't interested in meeting him?"

"... *probably?*" his daughter answered reluctantly. While she had worked diligently since her first days at Hogwarts to learn about the insular wizarding society and the complex social rules that defined it, life debts were not a concept she'd ever bothered to research prior to the hippogriff attack. And with her heavy course load, she'd only made a cursory study since then. In all honesty, she'd heard nothing about the matter since September and had assumed the Parkinsons would simply deny that a life debt was incurred and that would be the end of it.

Dan sighed. "Okay, send the RSVP saying you'll be there. It's not until after Christmas, so we've got time to ... I don't know, talk to a solicitor? Do they have magical solicitors?"

She nodded excitedly. "Yes! In fact, a good friend of mine is represented by a prominent magical law firm. I met two of them once. They seemed nice. And also ... *modern*, I suppose. The man even wore a suit!"

"*Thank heaven for small favors,*" Emma muttered to herself.

Moments later, after Hermione filed out the RSVP card and attached it to "Hekate," the mighty owl gave one last menacing hoot before flapping off into the night. Then, Emma finally spoke up.

"Hermione, would you mind going on up to your room for a while? Your father and I need to talk."

Hermione froze with her lips pursed tightly. "Of course," she finally said.

Moments later, the young witch was alone in her bedroom and suddenly very tired. After a moment of hesitation, she sat down at a small writing desk which currently held a wooden broom and the sharp knife she'd been using to care runes into its handle. Her Christmas homework for Ancient Runes had been to enchant a broomstick using just four runes, and this was as good a time as any to finish it. She paused in her delicate work after a few minutes to turn on the small television on the shelf facing her bed. "*Top of the Pops*" was on and featured a performance by some boy band aptly named "BoyZone." Hermione wasn't exactly a fan, but it did mostly block out the sound of her parents arguing loudly downstairs.

When she could clearly make out the sound of Emma Granger screaming "*Well of course you're okay with it! You're the squib! I'm just the Muggle!*" she wiped a few tears from her face and then turned the volume up higher before resuming her project.

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The next morning, Hermione contacted Harry Potter for the name of his solicitor. That afternoon, Hestia Jones apparated to the Granger residence where she talked with Hermione and her father for nearly two hours about life debts in general, about what was publicly known about House Parkinson, and about what Hestia privately suspected. Emma was not present as she had patients that day. If Dan had any thoughts about her not rescheduling those appointments in light of the Parkinson matter, he did not share them.

To say that Dan was nonplussed by Hestia's report was an understatement. He knew by now that there was a certain amount of bigotry in the wizarding community against Muggleborns (though learning that there was an official

slur – *Mudblood*, which sounded intensely vulgar – was news). But he was horrified to learn that within his daughter's lifetime, there had been an actual and violent civil insurrection instigated by wizards who wanted to exterminate people like his little girl. And that was before the *other* M-word was brought up.

"*Marriage!*" Dan bellowed. "Are you seriously telling me that forcing Hermione into *marrying* one of these bigoted swine is a possibility?!"

"No, Mr. Granger," Hestia said placatingly. "I'm simply saying that an offer of an arranged marriage is within the range of possible offers that might be on the table. Pansy Parkinson is the youngest of four children, and the second-youngest is a 19-year-old boy who has not yet been entered into a marriage contract."

"*NINETEEN?!!*" the Muggle spluttered in a fury.

"*But* Hermione is under no obligation to accept such an offer," she continued. "Though in all honesty, for *most* witches not born into established Families, marrying into a Noble family would represent an incredible opportunity."

"My daughter is not accepting a marriage proposal," Dan said coldly. "Not at 13. Not simply to resolve some medieval notion of family honor. And *absolutely* not to placate someone who is transparently bigoted towards people like her and was accused of being a terrorist!"

"Fair enough," the solicitor said with a nod. "Right, I'll go back to the office and do some research. I imagine the easiest way to resolve this would just be to make a simple money demand." Then, she frowned. "Though the Parkinsons probably don't have nearly as much to offer as

their status might suggest. They've been vassals of House Malfoy for decades, presumably because they can't afford to pay their own Wizengamot fees."

Hermione started and then leaned towards Hestia with a suddenly intense expression. "Um, could you tell us a bit more about all that?"

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**23 December 1993**  
**Potter Manor**  
**9:00 a.m.**

Two days before Christmas, Harry finally bit the metaphorical bullet and Flooed to Potter Manor for Christmas. He'd begged off from coming to his ancestral home until now by saying that he wanted to spend some time with Neville away from school. The young Gryffindor had been particularly affected by Theo's Ultimate Sanction, and, concerned for his friend's mental health, Harry had wanted to spend some time with him away from school. Which was an exaggeration, of course, but it was a better excuse than *"I needed to meet with my fellow conspirators in the Azkaban breakout."* Harry had actually suggested at one point that the group have an actual name for its conspiracy, but Rufus had slapped that down immediately.

"One of the hallmarks of *competently-run* criminal organizations is that they don't have some pretentious name for themselves that will sound terrifying when described to a jury," he'd said.

"Why don't we compromise, and just refer to the group as '*our little thing*'?" Regulus responded with a smirk, but except for Buck, no one got his reference to *La Cosa Nostra*.

In any case, Augusta was insistent about spending time with other family members this year and was not willing to return to Potter Manor for the holidays. Accordingly, Artemus Podmore would serve as Harry's chaperone instead. Harry had been quite apologetic about asking Artie to spend any of the holidays at Potter Manor on his account, but Artie waved those concerns off.

"I'm a widower with an estranged son, Harry. If I don't come with you, I'll be spending Christmas in a big house with naught but a house elf for company."

He went on to reassure Harry that a vacation at the opulent Potter Manor would compensate him for his time, and so he would only bill for those occasions when he was providing actual legal advice instead of simply enjoying the yuletide festivities. One such occasion would be later that afternoon during James's now-annual financial review of the Potter Estate for the benefit of his Heir. It was a good thing, too. Apparently, Pettigrew would be joining them for this year's review, and Harry was uncomfortable being alone in a room with just Pettigrew and James.

In fact, Harry had taken three showers at Longbottom Manor before Flooing over because of the presence of Jim's godfather. While Sirius was still unable to reveal Peter's exact animagus form, he had warned Harry that his former friend might have a preternaturally keen sense of smell, perhaps even good enough to pick up Sirius's scent off Harry. Or perhaps not – only the most gifted animagi could access the special abilities of their animal forms while still wearing a human shape, and Sirius doubted that Peter fit into that category.

After a series of welcoming hugs that Harry endured stoically, he dropped his suitcase off in his room and, at

James's urging, switched into Quidditch practice gear. Since Harry's last visit to the Manor, James had transfigured a seldom-used broom closet into a 50x30 chamber containing what appeared to be an over-sized tennis court with an enormous 20-foot-tall net strung halfway across. James proudly identified it as the *Quafflebash court*.

Quafflebash, it turned out, was a Quidditch variant that had been invented a few years earlier by young Norwegian wizards who wanted a game that could be played with fewer than fourteen people and indoors when the Scandinavian weather made regular Quidditch impractical. It had since become all the rage on the continent. After hearing the rules, Harry realized that some wizards had finally become aware of volleyball and decided to improve it by the addition of flying brooms.

*"Though to be fair,"* thought the Slytherin Chaser, *"nearly everything is better when done on a broom."*

In addition to James and Jim, Ron Weasley was also present and ready to play. The boy had apparently come over to deliver a few Christmas puddings and other desserts from his mother but had gotten permission to stay for a few hours.

Harry had played some volleyball during P.E. while in primary school (though it was most often just an opportunity for Dudley and his friends to throw big rubber balls at his head). Perhaps those vague memories were helpful because Harry took to the game rather quickly. For the first match, Harry and James teamed up to beat Jim and Ron quite decisively, though Ron did show surprising skill. To Jim's annoyance, Seeker training wasn't nearly as useful for Quafflebash as it was for Quidditch, but Ron's many years



as Keeper for the Weasley family seemed to make him a natural for the game. Harry wondered if the other boy would try out for the Gryffindor team next year.

Jim showed no signs of jealousy over Ron's skill though, and all four of them enjoyed the game thoroughly for most of the morning, playing several matches and mixing up the teams each time. James was in rare form and seemed delighted to simply be playing a game with both of his sons, something that he clearly wished he could have done long before now. Harry, for his part, found his emotions conflicted. He was at once (1) feeling positively disposed towards James Potter, (2) angry at himself for feeling positively disposed towards James Potter, and (3) *pretending* that he was unabashedly positively disposed towards James Potter because his plans to assure his own inheritance required him to refrain from burning any bridges. It was a complicated emotional state that probably would have been impossible for someone who wasn't an Occlumens.

After several hours of play, the three Potters joined Lily and Artie for lunch. Ron politely demurred saying he only had the morning free and had another fifteen deliveries to make in the afternoon. The comment baffled Harry until he noticed that the desserts Ron had delivered were still wrapped up in a box proudly adorned with a logo for *Molly's Magical Morsels* ... which only raised more questions than it answered.

Halfway through lunch, an expected (but unwelcome, at least in Harry's eyes) visitor arrived: Peter Pettigrew. James and Jim greeted the new arrival jovially. Lily, not quite so much, a fact that Harry noted. When Harry and Peter made eye contact, each of them smiled warmly at the other. And neither of them was fooled for a minute.

Peter joined the table for the remainder of lunch sitting between Jim and James with Harry as far away as he could manage without being obvious. Nevertheless, Harry did notice that on several occasions, the solicitor sniffed noticeably, as if he'd picked up a familiar but unexpected scent. Over lunch, the adults made small talk, mainly about Azkaban and the escaped Death Eaters. Harry was pleased that James seemed to have bought the idea that some sort of Muggleborn conspiracy was responsible for the breakout, though he had no idea what their motives might be.

"Keep that to yourselves, however," James warned everyone else at the table. "If it got out, we'd probably see a big surge of anti-Muggleborn bigotry."

Peter nodded sagely at that.

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After lunch, the Potter family business meeting had been scheduled in James's study, where Lord Potter would be joined by both of his sons and their respective solicitors. Artie asked if Mrs. Potter would be joining them as well.

"No," she said easily. "I'm not in charge of the Charitable Trust anymore, and everything else you'll be talking about is '*secret Potter stuff*.' No wives allowed."

"Oh honey!" James said consolingly as he pulled her into a hug. "I'd let you join us if I could, but ...."

"I know, I know. It's one of the medieval rules of the Potter House charter. Matters pertaining to the Potter Wizengamot seat can only be discussed by men. Chauvinistic and outdated, but still magically binding on you." She returned his hug and added a kiss to his cheek.

Only Harry was both positioned and perceptive enough to see her palm a galleon into James's pocket while her husband was distracted.

As the five males made their way to the Master's Study, Lily watched them all leave before quickly heading to her own private sanctum. There, she opened thin journal she'd prepared earlier and left sitting on the desk. On the first page was a particularly complex runic sequence that had taken three hours to inscribe with ink made from the same potion in which the galleon had been soaking for days. She tapped the runes with her wand in a complex pattern while intoning an incredibly obscure Charm taken from one of the many, many books on the shelves surrounding her. It was a slightly illegal book written in Arabic and dating back to the Ottoman Empire. Not Azkaban-worthy, but it was probably bad enough to make James squeal over the size of the fine the family would have to pay if it were discovered in her possession by the authorities.

As soon as she finished the incantation, she turned to the second page which was blank ... until words started to appear: the current date and time, followed by the start of a magical transcript.

*JAMES POTTER: Okay, gentlemen. Welcome to the Master's Study.*

*ARTEMUS PODMORE, ESQ.: Impressive. I feel like we should be smoking cigars and drinking port.*

*JAMES POTTER: (laughter) Well, I'm sure that's been done in here on many occasions, but the boys are still a bit too young, I think.*

Satisfied that her enchanted coin was working properly, Lily leaned back in her chair and pulled the book into her lap as

she followed along with the private meeting.

For the most part, it was a somewhat boring conversation focused on House Potter's financial affairs, made even more boring by the fact Lily could not see the documents being referred to which made it hard to follow Peter's summary report. In years past, Lily had been justifiably proud of how the Potter Charitable Trust had grown under her management before her new job at Hogwarts forced her to turn the whole thing over to James's solicitor and longtime friend.

Lily had no reason to doubt Peter's competence and professionalism, but when *she* ran the Trust, full audits were an annual occurrence. Peter's decision to save on accounting fees by only having a full audit every *five* years (the bare minimum permissible under Ministry rules regulating charitable foundations) rankled her, but James had been persuaded by his friend so there was nothing more to say about it. She did smile approvingly when Artemus Podmore asked several insightful questions about the auditing process and other financial matters that Peter glossed over and which James barely understood.

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Oblivious to Lily's eavesdropping, the group spent several hours discussing the House's finances before moving to a summary of everything that had happened in the Wizengamot in which the House had staked out a position. To James's disappointment, Arthur Weasley had once again politely but firmly turned down House Potter's offer of vassalage. The House had no other vassals presently, and Peter had some concerns about Sirius Black, wherever he was currently, and the Power of Attorney he'd executed years before in favor of James. If the Death Eater signed the proper paperwork and got it submitted to the Ministry, even

while an escaped felon, he could invalidate that Power of Attorney, and House Potter would lose control over the ten Black votes.

James wrapped up the official part of the meeting by reaching into his desk and pulling out a small velvet box which he passed over to Harry.

"I was going to save this until we exchanged gifts on Christmas Eve, but ... well, I'm a hot-headed Gryffindor with no patience. And anyway, this probably counts as Wizengamot business."

Harry opened the box and gasped. It was a gold ring with a stylized P in the center – the Potter Heir's ring. Or at least a reasonable facsimile thereof.

"That's just a duplicate, I'm afraid," James said regretfully. "The *real* Heir's ring is still being Charmed. It should be ready this summer, so I thought we'd have an official ceremony during the Birthday Gala where I'll elevate you to Heir Apparent and give you the real ring, but if you want to wear that until then, that'll be fine."

He coughed in embarrassment. "To be honest, I never considered wearing mine when I was in school. Too gaudy and pompous, I thought back then. But I understand that the social climate in Slytherin is a bit different than Gryffindor."

Everyone laughed at that obvious understatement.

"It is indeed," Harry said with a genuine smile. "I will wear it with honor ... until this summer, at least." Then, he turned to his twin who was craning his neck to look at the Heir's Ring simulacrum.

"You okay with this?" he asked cautiously.

"What, with you becoming Heir Apparent?" Jim pretended to think about it. "I dunno. When you become Lord, are you gonna keep me in the lifestyle to which I've become accustomed? Or are you gonna kick me to the curb without a knut to my name?"

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment. "I'm not sure yet. Ask me again after the Slytherin-Gryffindor Quidditch match."

Everyone laughed again, and no one seemed to notice that Harry had slipped the box into his pocket without putting the ring on (something he had *no intention* of doing until it had been checked out - no way in hell would he put on a ring that might have passed through Peter Pettigrew's hands).

Then, James reached back into his desk, this time pulling out a thick file folder.

"One last thing. Probably not as impressive as an imitation Heir's Ring, Harry, but you might find it interesting since you brought the matter to my attention. This file contains all the publicly available information about the death of Nobby Leach, as well as the deaths of Tom Riddle's circle of friends from his time at Hogwarts. And *also* the deaths and disappearances of several *other* political supporters of Leach that no one even thought to look at until you brought this matter up and I started looking for other connections."

"Who's Tom Riddle?" Peter asked in genuine curiosity, and Harry filed that ignorance away as a fact to be considered later.

James hesitated as he figured how to respond despite the Fidelius that protected Voldemort's true identity.

"He was a Hogwarts student from the 1940's who was implicated in the first Chamber of Secrets affair in 1943. The man himself disappeared back in the 50's, but he had a circle of close friends who all became influential in Muggleborn rights politics ... until they all died under different and what we now consider suspicious circumstances. It was Harry who brought the matter to the DMLE's attention. And when the Azkaban crisis is resolved, I plan to reopen all those old cases." He hesitated. "We now think You-Know-Who might have been involved."

Peter blinked in visible (and, Harry noted, genuine) surprise. "Really? How extraordinary!" He turned to Harry. "And how equally extraordinary that you should be the one to discover these long-forgotten crimes."

The boy shrugged diffidently. "We're Potters. I think we're all obligated to do everything in our power to fight against You-Know-Who. And his *lackeys*."

"... indeed," Peter replied.

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Soon after, the meeting finally ended. In her private study, Lily tapped the runes on the first page of her journal with her wand in a complex pattern. The runes flashed softly, and the coin in James's pocket ceased to have any magical properties. If and when James found it later, he might wonder how a spare galleon ended up in his trousers, but he certainly wouldn't think it magical, let alone a listening device.

Outside the study, Harry and Artie were headed back to Artie's room where they would review what they'd learned

when a voice called out behind them.

"Heir Potter?" It was Pettigrew, who sauntered towards them with a bland smile on his lips. "I wanted to congratulate you on your rapprochement with your father. I know the last time we spoke, some ... intemperate remarks were made. I hope you understand that I was just looking out for my best friend and my godson."

"Think nothing of it," Harry replied easily. "I fully understand what your priorities were ... and are."

Pettigrew smiled without a hint of sincerity. "I'm so glad to hear it, Harry. And for what it's worth, I *know* that you will be an exceptional Heir and, someday, an exceptional Lord Potter."

And with those remarks, the kaleidoscope in Harry's head whirled and clicked into position, and he suddenly *knew* that Peter Pettigrew meant to kill him, probably before he could be officially named Heir at the end of July. *But* Harry also knew that the secret Death Eater would not try to do so right now here in Potter Manor and in front of a witness, so the boy could afford to have some fun.

"Thank you so much," he said with fake cheer. "It really means a lot coming from you ... *Uncle Pete*."

Peter visibly flinched at that last remark. Harry smirked before heading away down the hall. The Death Eater stared after Harry and his solicitor with such intensity that he was startled when Jim came up behind him.

"So, I see you and Harry are finally getting along?" his godson inquired cheerfully.



Peter nodded. "I think we have ... the beginnings of a relationship." Then, the animagus looked down at his godson and sniffed loudly. "And now that we're alone, I've been wondering all afternoon. Why in Merlin's name does your breath smell of Mandrake leaf?"

The boy laughed. "That's a really sensitive nose you've got there ... *Uncle Wormtail!*"

Peter's eyes widened and he looked around quickly. "So, James finally told you?" he said in a low voice.

"No, and I'd appreciate it if you don't tell him I'm trying to follow in his footsteps. I want it to be a surprise."

The older man gave him a sour look. "I imagine it will be. For good or ill. Do you at least have a teacher? We were absolute idiots to have done it on our own at that age. And if James didn't tell you about my old nickname, how did you find out?"

"I've got a teacher," Jim answered cheerfully. "One who I'd like you to meet sometime. I think you and he have a lot to talk about."

That night, when Harry was alone in his room, he lay down on his bed, closed his eyes, and reached out to his new secret friend.

"*Well,*" Harry thought to himself, "*What do you think about Peter Pettigrew?*"

"*He isss marked, my Massster,*" hissed the snake tattoo that had slithered up Harry's neck to whisper in his ear. "*It isss hidden and sssleeping. But it isss there.*"

Harry acknowledged the confirmation and then commanded Mark to slither back down and resume an S-shaped configuration on Harry's left hip. After a few minutes, Harry fell asleep.

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## **24 December 1993**

The Dewey Ledbetter Home for Senior Wizards and Witches

Dorset, Southwest England

11:00 p.m.

Dolores Jane Umbridge sat in an uncomfortable chair quietly working on the *Prophet's* crossword puzzle while waiting for her father to die. It was not how she'd wanted to spend Christmas Eve, but the matron had Floo-called her this morning to say that her father's condition had declined precipitously, and he was not expected to live much longer. And so, Dolores, having resigned herself to the worst Christmas ever, pulled on a grey jumper over a sensible black skirt and summoned a fresh bowl of cat food for Tiger, Lucky, Tiddles, and Miss Fantastico before apparating straight to the nursing home.

Orford Umbridge was not yet 60 years old, but physically and mentally, the wizard resembled a Muggle in his 90's. Dolores never knew how he came to suffer a curse that both aged him prematurely and left him so addle-brained that he could barely cast a spell beyond what a Third Year could do. She was *certain* it was a curse, however. When she was a girl at Hogwarts, she took DADA classes all the way to a NEWT because of her obsession with finding a cure for her father's condition. She never did – the spell was far too dark and obscure to ever be covered by Hogwarts' generally low-quality DADA curriculum – but she learned enough to be certain that Orford had been heavily

cursed either before she was born or soon after. She often wondered if part of that curse was what compelled him to fall in love with and marry a piece of Muggle filth by the name of Ellen Cracknell. Or perhaps it just made him foolish enough not only to wander into the Muggle world but also to overlook the Muggle woman's flaws, and the Fate did the rest.

The dowdy witch shook her head and tried to banish those last thoughts. While a Slytherin, Dolores had never been either a blood-purist or a Muggle-hater, even if she shared her coworkers' disdain for Muggle-*lovers* like Arthur Weasley. Intellectually, she knew it was wrong to disdain *all* Muggles just because of her feelings for her own Muggle mother.

Alas, it was sometimes rather hard for Dolores to maintain such open-mindedness when her own mother had tried to drown her in a bathtub at the age of 8.

In 1963, the young witch had a bout of accidental magic which her frightened mother attributed to "*demonic possession*," and she tried to cure her daughter with a forced baptism ... one that involved holding the child's head underwater for extended periods of time. It was not the first time the mentally unstable Ellen Cracknell had tried to harm her daughter, but it was the worst and, thankfully (after Orford showed up in the nick of time), the last. Dolores never saw her mother again after that day, nor did she even consider attending the woman's funeral in 1970. Still, that sort of thing made an impact on a young witch, so much so that Dolores lied to her Slytherin housemates for seven years and pretended her mother was a Pureblood witch who died giving birth to her.

Suddenly, Dolores was distracted from her reminiscences by a soft groan from the bed. Orford was waking up.

"Daddy?" she said softly as she leaned over towards the bed. "It's Dee. Are you in any pain? Do you want me to go and fetch the nurse?"

"D-Dee?" he mumbled, still half-asleep. "Izzat you?"

"Yes, Daddy. I'm here."

The fading wizard smiled but did not open his eyes. "M'glad you came to see me ... b'fore th'end."

"Shhh!" she said. "Don't talk like that. Now, are your hurting at all?"

He shook his head. "M'alright. Potions take th'edge off. Just set there and talk to me for a while. Tell me 'bout yer new job again."

And she did. For nearly an hour (and through occasional tears and sniffles), she told him all about working for Minister Fudge, about how exciting it was to put on the official plum-colored Wizengamot robes for the first time, about how proud she was of finally being in a position to do some good in the world. The dying man smiled at her once more and closed his eyes as his breath became more labored. Finally, he spoke.

"M'proud of ya, Dee," he whispered in a raspy voice. "I truly am. N' I know, if yer mother were here, she'd be proud o'ya too."

Despite herself, Dolores snorted even as she wiped a tear from her face. "Daddy, I doubt that Ellen Cracknell would

be proud of anything I ever did, especially as far as the wizarding government goes"

"Nah, Dee," he gasped. "N' Ellen. I meant Della. Yer *real* mother."

Dolores Jane Umbridge sat perfectly still as her entire world changed in the blink of an eye.

"... *what?*" she finally asked in a shaky voice. But Orford Umbridge did not answer her.

In fact, he never spoke again. Dead men tell no tales.

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**25 December 1993 (Christmas Day)**  
**12 Grimmauld Place**  
**8:00 a.m.**

"MERRY CHRISTMAS!" were two words that probably no prior Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of Black had ever uttered, let alone bellowed at the top of his lungs while banging on the bedroom doors of his family members. Moments later, a bleary-eyed Regulus and Bellatrix stepped out of their respective rooms to stare at Sirius (who was dressed like Father Christmas!) in consternation.

"Sirius!" Regulus snapped. "What the bloody hell do you think you're doing?!"

"It's Christmas Day, Reg! My first since leaving Azkaban! It's a day of celebration! Of peace and good will to all wizards and witches!"

The Metamorphmagus yawned. "Yes, yes. Zuzu's petals, and all that. But that's hardly call for a *pre-dawn raid* on our

morning rest. Bellatrix and I have important work this afternoon."

"Right-o," Sirius said merrily even though he had no idea who or what "Zuzu" might be. "Which is why I decided to have an early morning Christmas breakfast for us all! Including an honest-to-goodness Christmas pudding that some witch named Molly made and Dobby collected for me. We're family! And families celebrate Christmas! And also, who knows how things will go at Gringotts. We might all be dead tomorrow!"

Bellatrix grimaced at his morbid humor. She'd spent the last five days being interrogated by Rufus Scrimgeour about every bit of Death Eater-related bit of knowledge she could recall. Since he'd finished her debriefing already, it was decided that she would go today to fetch the Cup Horcrux from Gringotts. When Rufus was not interviewing Bellatrix, he spent his days brainstorming with Snape and Regulus (and with Lucius via Floo call) on how to penetrate the Gringotts security so that an escaped Death Eater could access her vault and retrieve perhaps the darkest object ever stored in that bank.

The three Blacks retired to the kitchen where Dobby had prepared a hearty feast for which the Christmas pudding was the climax. At 11:00, Scrimgeour arrived bearing several vials of Polyjuice Potion brewed by Snape so that if Bellatrix were forced to flee the bank, she would be able to change her appearance quickly. Regulus provided her with a highly illegal portkey Charmed by Lucius Malfoy that could transport her to a safe house in Paris if need be. Both Reg and Rufus would both accompany her to Gringotts and be on hand to distract any Aurors in and around the goblin bank - the conspirators were anticipating a DMLE presence of some kind since the Ministry surely anticipated that one

or more of the escaped prisoners would make eventually try to reach Gringotts. At Rufus's insistence, the group once more reviewed his timetable for their caper as well as the map of Gringotts he'd somehow acquired.

The group left just before noon, with Rufus finishing off the last of the pudding and declaring it quite delicious. Sirius hugged both Regulus and Bellatrix and begged them both to be careful. Even ignoring the Auror presence, Gringotts security was legendary. As they apparated away to Diagon Alley, Sirius pursed his lips anxiously, wondering if he would ever see them again.

As it turned out, he saw them again less than an hour later, as the door flew open and an annoyed Regulus stormed in, followed by an equally annoyed Rufus and an amused Bellatrix.

"What's the matter?" Sirius asked anxiously. "What went wrong?"

Rufus and Reg ignored him and headed straight for the liquor cabinet. Bella followed behind with a heavy valise under her arm. She laughed.

"What went wrong? Why, *nothing* went wrong! That's why they're so upset!"

"Eh? What does that mean?"

"It means, Black," Rufus Scrimgeour said irritably, "that we've been planning this daring heist for days, and in the end, it was like breaking into a paper bag!"

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***Thirty minutes earlier ...***

"Ahem!" Bellatrix said to the goblin teller. Her voice echoed through the nearly empty bank. There were no Aurors here. In fact, there were no other wizards or witches here at all. Except for Bellatrix and her two companions (both of whom were standing elsewhere in the empty lobby, trying and failing to look inconspicuous), the place was devoid of customers on this Christmas morn.

"Yes?" snarled the goblin teller.

"I wish to make a withdrawal from my vault, but I do not have my key."

The goblin, whose nameplate identified him as Spinecrusher, sneered at her and then handed over a sheet of parchment and a blood quill.

"Write your name on that!"

After a moment of hesitation, the witch wrote "Bellatrix Black" onto the parchment, ignoring the itching sensation on her forearm engendered by the blood quill. She handed the parchment and quill back to Spinecrusher, who examined the it closely.

"Bellatrix Black?" he said loud enough to be heard throughout the lobby.

"Y-yes," she stammered. The goblin glared at her for several seconds before speaking.

"There will be a ten-galleon fee for lost vault keys. How do you wish to pay?"

"Withdraw the funds from my vault, please."



The goblin looked at her speculatively, and perhaps cruelly. "Do you wish to pay the Confidential Transaction Fee as well?"

She looked at him in confusion. "The what?"

"Except for certain banking activities for which confidentiality is automatically imposed, all Gringotts transactions with non-goblin customers are only subject to confidentiality if explicitly contracted for. Confidential service agreements range from the 10-galleon basic protection plan, under which we will refrain from actively seeking out people who might be interested in your affairs and selling your sensitive information to them, to the 500-galleon gold plan, under which all physical evidence of your transactions will be erased after our business is concluded, any unauthorized personnel who gain access to your transaction history will be Obliviated of such knowledge, and every authorized Gringotts employee will take an Unbreakable Oath never to reveal any such knowledge."

Bellatrix thought for a moment and then remembered she was rich. "The gold plan, please. Take the money needed for that from my vault as well."

"Very good, Miss Black." The goblin looked over her shoulder and across the room. "Here is your replacement key. Do you wish the two gentlemen who are pretending not to know you to accompany you down to your vault?"

Despite herself, Bellatrix snickered while the two wizards behind her looked at one another in consternation.

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"After that," Bellatrix told an astonished Sirius, "we went down to my vault, I deactivated the defenses, and then I simply took the Cup ... along with about 5,000 galleons for

spending money. The goblins even generously gave me this lovely carrying case to transport it in."

She tipped the valise out over the coffee table, and an ornate golden cup (festooned with playful badger decorations) fell out onto the dining room table, followed by three heaping bags of gold coins.

"All in all," she said, "the whole thing was rather anticlimactic."

"I would describe the whole thing as *bloody ridiculous!*" Scrimgeour ranted. "*Inconceivable*."

Simply *inconceivable* that there was no Ministry presence at Gringotts, even if it is Christmas Day. What in Merlin's name have the Aurors been doing for the last five months? Knitting!?"

Regulus shook his head, finally calming down enough to be as amused as Bella. "You keep using that word, Rufus. I do not think it means what you think it means."

Scrimgeour turned to him sharply in confusion. "What word? *Knitting*?! Of course I know what that means!"

Sirius interrupted him with an amazed expression.

"Morgana's bloomers, man! Are you seriously *complaining* that getting one of You-Know-Who's horcruxes was *easier* than you expected?!" Then, he laughed. "Heh. Seriously complaining. That should be my job!"

Regulus curled a lip in distaste at his brother's bad pun as he poured himself another glass of brandy. "Oh for pity's sake! That one doesn't even make sense!"

Sirius snickered. "So, what now? Do we go ahead and destroy this thing?" he said while pointing at the Cup.

Regulus frowned. "No. I want to wait until everyone can be here to witness its destruction." He looked at the others with a suddenly ashen expression. "Harry and I are the only ones to have been present for the destruction of a horcrux. I think *everyone* needs to fully understand what we're dealing with. Harry, Neville, Augusta, and Lucius should all be available on New Year's Day. We'll do it then."

Then, it was Sirius's turn to frown. "Is there a particular reason you want my godson present?"

"Yes," Regulus replied as he turned back towards the golden chalice sitting on the coffee table. "But for right now, let's just call it a *Slytherin thing* and leave it at that."

Sirius narrowed his eyes somewhat dangerously but said nothing more.

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## ***28 December 1993***

### ***Summerisles***

From the outside, Summerisles did not look that impressive. The restaurant's reputation was famous across Wizarding Britain, and so it had nothing to prove to casual passersby. The Summerisles clientele generally consisted of two classes of diners: those who had the sense to make reservations days or even weeks ahead and those who had enough money and status to get in without a reservation. The latter group was an elite fraternity indeed, and so Summerisles had no need of an opulent exterior to attract walk-in customers. Luckily, Hermione and her party had a reservation today.

As the young witch entered the restaurant's foyer along with her father and her solicitor, they were met with an officious young maître d' who nodded approvingly at Hestia's fashionable winter robes. He was slightly less approving of Hermione, who wore a simple cloak with a Muggle dress underneath. He was openly disapproving of Dan, who against Hestia's advice had accompanied the two wearing a Muggle suit-and-tie.

"May I help you?" he said pompously.

Hestia stepped forward. "Hermione Granger and Hestia Jones. We're meeting Lord Parkinson for lunch. I believe we have a reservation under his name."

The maître d' pretended to study the reservation book for several minutes as if he weren't perfectly aware that a Noble Lord had reserved a private room for himself and two female guests.

"Hmm. I do see that his Lordship has reserved a room for himself and the two of you. However, he did not make allowances for anyone else," the officious young man wrinkled his nose in Dan's direction as if he could smell the Muggleness, "so I'm afraid your ... gentleman friend will have to wait outside."

"Seriously?" Dan said contemptuously. "Outside? You don't even have a bar I could wait in? I should wait outside? What's the expression - *No dogs or Irishmen allowed?*"

"Daddy!" Hermione whispered nervously.

"I am sorry sir, but this is Summerisles. We can't just allow ... *anyone* to come in."

Dan was just about to give an angry retort when someone beat him to it.

"Rupert!" said a burly middle-aged wizard with vivid red hair and bushy eyebrows and who had apparently been just beyond the main door. "What's going on here?"

The maître d' blanched. "M-Mister Legard! I was just telling this ... gentleman ...."

"Yes, yes. That Summerisles has *standards*. And it does. *Just not the ones you seem to think.*"

He stepped towards Dan and stuck out his hand. "Gaston Legard, at your service. Welcome to my restaurant."

Surprised, Dan shook Legard's hand readily. "Dan Granger. A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Legard."

Legard turned back to Rupert. "Escort these two ladies to their dining salon. I'll show Mr. Granger to the bar where he will be my personal guest for as long as he remains." The master chef's expression darkened. "Come and see me in my office at the end of your shift," he said coldly.

The young wizard went deathly pale, and then he nodded. "Of ... of course, Mr. Legard." The chastened maître d' led Hermione and Hestia in one direction while Legard led Dan into a small bar area off to the side.

"You're welcome to wait in here, Mr. Granger. I assume that you realize what a bad idea it might be for a Muggle to crash a luncheon hosted by someone like Parkinson, right?"

"How did you know I'm a Muggle?" Dan asked suspiciously.

"You mean, aside from that Muggle suit that no Pureblood would be caught dead in? And that Windsor knot in your necktie that no Pureblood would know how to tie?" The chef/owner smiled. "I'm a Half-Blood, Mr. Granger, though I don't always advertise it. And I spent a lot of time in the Muggle world learning how to cook. *Really* cook, that is. Not just cast a spell to throw together some bland soup or else leave everything to a house elf. Hardly anyone in the wizarding world knows how to make a decent grilled cheese sandwich, let alone the stuff we sell here."

The side bar was not a large room, but it could seat twenty or thirty at the bar and the nearby tables. Currently, though, there were no other customers, as noon was not a popular time for drinking among reputable wizards and witches. Dan thought it looked posh but in an understated way, the sort of oak-paneled bar one might find in a Victorian gentleman's club or a very upscale pub. There was only one person behind the bar, a stout wizard with a bushy and heavily-waxed mustache that was stylishly curled on the ends.

"Max," Legard said. "Mr. Granger here is my personal guest for today. His lunch and drinks are on the house." The man paused briefly before speaking to Max in a quieter tone. "Don't let him have anything that might cause ... *effects*."

"Mr. Legard," Dan said. "This is all very kind of you, but you needn't go to such lengths. I'm just waiting for my daughter to finish her ... business meeting."

"Think nothing of it," Legard said. Then, he leaned in and whispered into the man's ear. "*I've been on the outside looking too, Mr. Granger.*" Then, the legendary chef clapped Dan Granger on the arm before leaving the bar to return to his kitchen.

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While the exterior of Summerisles might be considered plain and even austere, the insides were another matter. Despite herself, Hermione gasped as the maître d' led her and Hestia through the main dining area. The large room was decorated in an Art Nouveau style that greatly resembled Maxim's of Paris, one of the most famous restaurants in the world and one which Hermione had visited with her parents when she was a little girl. But no one could mistake Summerisles for a Muggle eatery. The ceiling and all four walls were covered with glass windows that had been enchanted to show a false image of sandy beaches and crystal blue ocean waters with an inviting summer sun overhead amid a cloudless sky. It looked for all the world as if the dining room was literally situated in the center of a small island in the middle of the sea, lit by a summer sky no matter what time of year.

The maître d' led the two witches across the room to a small recessed alcove complete with a table large enough for the two of them and their host. Parkinson was waiting for them. He was a middle-aged man with jet-black hair that had been slicked back, and his robes were fashionable and neat, as opposed to the more foppish attire Hermione had come to expect from rich Purebloods.

The meeting with Parkinson started off well enough, with the man introducing himself politely (after taking a few seconds to set up privacy wards). Hestia, who set up additional wards of her own, had previously advised Hermione that Parkinson wouldn't get to the point quickly. Pureblood decorum meant that they would enjoy their meal and make civilized small-talk and then get to business over dessert and coffee. The only moment of tension before lunch was served came when the waiter, who was as

condescending as the maître d' if not so blatantly bigoted, attempted to explain to Hermione what the menu said.

"Je sais parler français, merci," she interrupted in French. "J'ai prendrais la Salade Niçoise et le Jarret de Boeuf."

Parkinson crooked an eyebrow at that, but he said nothing. Hermione couldn't tell if he was offended at her bluntness or pleased that she'd put a servant in his place (always assuming either man had even understood what she'd said). She assumed Parkinson spent a lot of time slapping down social inferiors, which probably included everyone he encountered who was not obviously a social superior. To her surprise, however, he was generally polite with her over the course of their luncheon, if a bit stiff. The meal passed quickly as the three diners made small talk about Hermione's Hogwarts classes and her career ambitions. Parkinson was visibly impressed at the witch's heavy course load, particularly since his daughter Pansy's academic problems had been a bone of contention at the Parkinson house since her first year.

From there, the trio finally settled into the true purpose of their meeting. While Parkinson was genteel, if condescending, he made his position abundantly clear. The honor of House Parkinson demanded that the debt owed to Hermione be repaid as quickly as possible. In general, Lord Parkinson detested the idea of life debts, but he was also very paranoid and almost superstitious about them. Hermione responded, in a display of honesty that made Hestia wince, that she still wasn't sure she was owed a life debt since she might well have simply saved Pansy from a serious injury.

"That may well be true, Miss Granger," he replied. "And it is certainly a factor in our negotiations. But my Pansy



certainly *seems* to think she owes you a debt." He smiled. "And I doubt I need to tell you how upsetting she finds that prospect."

"I can imagine," Hermione said drily.

"And to be honest, it is not a prospect I find appealing either. I've had opportunity to look into your background, Miss Granger. As I'm sure you've investigated mine. And so, you are probably aware of the tattoo that mars my left forearm. While I will deny to my dying breath ever willingly taking the Dark Mark, I must confess that my upbringing and the social circles in which I travel would make certain ... *political views* essential to my wellbeing and will color any relationship between us."

He took a sip of his port. "That said, I assure you that I am not quite the ogre that you were probably expecting. Blood matters to me, Miss Granger. But so do talent, intellect, and ambition. From what I know of you, young lady, there are a great many opportunities I could offer you despite your unfortunate blood status. But there is a second factor that closes those doors - The Outcast."

Hermione lifted her chin. "What about Theo?"

"Pansy informs me that you have chosen to maintain a relationship with the Outcast despite the hostility imposed by the Ultimate Sanction. And whatever gifts you have to offer, not even a life debt owed by my daughter is enough for me to bring the Ultimate Sanction into my household. And so, right from the start, we can exclude certain options like marriage proposals or blood adoptions or simply pressuring your distant relatives, the Dagworth-Grangers, into accepting you as a family member, even assuming you would consider such options."

He chuckled. "It's a pity you're a Gryffindor, Miss Granger. If you were a Slytherin or even a Ravenclaw, I'm certain you'd see the wisdom of cutting ties with Theo No-Name. And profit mightily from doing so."

"But I am, so I won't," she answered firmly.

"Of course." He drained his glass. "So let us forego further shadow-dancing. *What do you want* in exchange for a declaration that Pansy's debt has been satisfied? Or, if you are more mercenary about it than I'm expecting, *how much do you want?*"

Hermione said nothing. She just nodded towards Hestia, who removed a small scrap of parchment from her purse which she pushed across the table to Parkinson. The wizard unfolded it and then had a brief coughing fit.

"This is ... a *very* large sum of money," he finally said.

"It is 17% of your reported net worth, Lord Parkinson, at least according to your known holdings," Hestia replied blandly. Of course, she privately thought that Parkinson was underreporting the amount of financial debt he was carrying by quite a bit in order to uphold his family's social stature, but she wasn't going to be the one to suggest Lord Parkinson wasn't as rich as he liked to proclaim. That said, she did take a certain satisfaction in noticing the light sheen of sweat that had suddenly appeared on the Pureblood's brow.

"I've researched the history of life debt resolutions in Wizarding Britain over the last 300 years. Records are, of course, sparse as most debt resolutions are handled privately. But of those whose terms are publicly known and involve financial settlements, 17% of the debtor family's net

worth is the average settlement price. In fact, possibly a bit on the low side."

Then, she reached back into her bag and removed a much larger parchment scroll.

"Of course, if that's not acceptable, we do have an alternative proposal. The total financial obligation is significantly smaller, but the proposal overall is more ... *novel*."

He frowned at that and then unfurled the scroll she'd passed over to him. Item #1 would require him to pay for all of Hestia Jones's fees to date, as well as any future attorney's fees incurred executing the remainder of the agreement. Item #2 called for a lump sum payment of 30,000 galleons, a fraction of the amount listed on the first parchment. To Parkinson's surprise, the money would not be going to Hermione herself. Rather, it would go towards establishing a foundation for the benefit of Muggleborns and squibs, providing scholarships for apprenticeships and other forms of financial assistance to the former and help with integrating into either Muggle or magical society as preferred to the latter. His lip curled at the thought of spending his hard-earned galleons on the dregs of society, but it was much better than the financial ruin that the first parchment offered. Besides, he assumed the Mudblood would at least be agreeable with him donating the funds anonymously.

Then, he got down to Item #3 and frowned. It stated that future financial support for the fund would be provided by House Parkinson by means of a Corsican Arrangement. He looked up to Hestia in confusion.

"What is a Corsican Arrangement?" he asked cautiously.

"It is a form of magical binding contract, Lord Parkinson, one which causes those bound to pay for breaches by magically-directed financial transactions. While most Corsican Arrangements affect only individuals, when entered into by a Head of House and then countersigned by a Gringotts representative, it is binding on all members of the family. Under the terms of such a contract, there would be a list of requirements which must be fulfilled and/or actions which are forbidden. Whenever any family member violates any of the terms, an appropriate sum of galleons is automagically transferred from your family's vaults to the vault that will be set up for the foundation."

His face hardened. "And what sort of terms will you be proposing?"

"You can't be bigots," Hermione said flatly. "Not without paying for it. Every time Pansy calls someone a Mudblood or a blood traitor, that's ten galleons. Every time she hexes one of us in the hallway, that's a hundred." She tilted her head slightly as she regarded him. "And of course, we know that you were only a Death Eater because you were put under the Imperius Curse and would never have served You-Know-Who otherwise. *But*, if you or any of your family ever seriously harms or kills a Muggleborn, a squib, or even a Muggle, the penalty clause would be ... significant. Potentially to the point of being ... impoverishing."

He snorted angrily. "For someone seemingly so incensed at how magic has treated the Outcast, you are oddly at ease at the thought of putting my entire family under a geas with the potential to destroy us."

Hestia shrugged. "That boy never did anything to deserve being punished like he is. And if neither you nor anyone in

your family does do anything to deserve it, you won't be punished at all."

He looked back down at the parchment. "This will not punish thoughts, then? Only actions and words used directly against Mu ... against those described here?"

"When you and your family are not around people who would be offended," Hestia said with a smile, "please feel free to use the M-word to your heart's content."

He grumbled at her humor and then studied the proposal once more. "And is this it? This is all you want?"

"Yes," said Hestia.

"No," said Hermione at the same time.

The solicitor turned her head sharply towards her client, who reached into the pocket of her cloak and withdrew a third scrap of folded parchment which she slid over to Pansy's father. Intrigued, for this was obviously not something the girl had discussed with her solicitor before now, Parkinson unfolded the paper and read the contents. Then, he read them again, his eyes widening and then narrowing as he absorbed the final item being proposed.

"Unexpected," he said slowly. "Very unexpected indeed. Tell me, Miss Granger. Why is this a matter of concern to you?"

"It just is," she responded without emotion.

He studied her carefully but could not divine her intentions. "And what if, in the end, he is not able to afford to pay the cost?"

"Then, I suppose that clause is null and void, and you only need concern yourself with the other terms."

He stared at her with a frightening intensity before leaning back and nodding.

"The terms are satisfactory. Draw up the final contract, Solicitor Jones. When you are ready, arrange to meet me at Gringotts where we will sign the documents and execute the oaths."

He stood and bowed respectfully to them both and then left the private room. Hestia turned to her client in consternation.

"Well? Do you want to tell me what that was all about then?"

Hermione picked up her water glass and took a long sip.  
"Let's just call it ... insurance."

Outside, Andrew Lord Parkinson pulled the slip of parchment out of his pocket and studied it once more.

"*What is your game, Little Mudblood?*" he thought to himself. "*Or perhaps I should ask ... what is his game?*"

***You will swear to maintain and continue your oaths of fealty to***

***Lucius Malfoy and/or the House of Malfoy for a minimum of ten years***

***or until the Head of House Malfoy voluntarily releases the House of Parkinson from its obligation of loyalty.***

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**31 December 1993**

**A subterranean cavern beneath Cauchemar Abbey  
11:48 p.m.**

The soft clack of Auntie Camilla's cane reverberated through the dark dank cave tunnels that were honeycombed beneath Cauchemar Abbey, ancestral home of the House of Selwyn. As she made her way down to the Spawning Pool, Camilla pulled her knitted shawl closer around her to ward off the bitter winter chill of the tunnels and catacombs. She grumbled under her breath. The ritual she was about to undertake worked best at midnight on New Year's Eve. Practically the whole world viewed this night as a time of transition, the moment when Janus exchanged one face for another, a brief opportunity when all doors could be opened - even those that the wise and the good and the sane would leave shut. That said, Camilla knew that only a few centuries before, Britain celebrated the start of the New Year in March when it was much warmer in these forgotten caverns. The December chill did not agree with her rheumatism at all. She supposed she should petition for Grandfather to heal her of the maladies of age.

Behind Camilla, the twin girls, Flora and Hestia Carrow, followed a respectful distance, their path illuminated not just by the ball of conjured light that floated over Camilla's head, but also by the eerie glow of bioluminescent lichen and fungi that covered the walls and ceiling.

"So, dearies," the ancient woman said to pass the time. "Did you enjoy your Christmas presents?"

"Oh yes, Auntie Camilla," they answered in perfect unison. "But we do wish we could have played with our dolls a bit longer. They broke so quickly."

Camilla clucked her tongue. "I did tell you, dearies. You have to take care of your dolls and other toys. Muggles are very fragile. It takes very little effort to ruin them until they

die... or until they simply want to die so badly that they're no longer entertaining. Still, in the end, even after you broke them all, they at least provided a lovely Yuletide repast, didn't they?"

The twins nodded in agreement, as they pleasantly recalled their first Christmas feast. Finally, the trio entered the large cavern where the Spawning Pool waited. This room was much warmer due to the steam given off by the small hot spring located in the center of the chamber. It was also much brighter, as the chamber was lit by a pallid glow emanating from the large pod-like objects that hung from the ceiling. The light was not constant. Instead it flashed in a regular pattern, one that hinted at the beating of a human heart. Still, it was enough to illuminate the whole chamber if dimly.

Camilla led Flora and Hestia straight to the pool. The sickly-sweet scent given off by the pool made the two girls somewhat light-headed but not enough to impair their senses. They knew what was coming and were prepared for it. The three females swiftly disrobed down to the skin and left their clothes in a pile behind them. Flora was the slowest, for she could not take her eyes off the bubbling pool at her feet. Camilla noticed and put a hand on Flora's bare shoulder.

"Frightened?" Camilla asked with uncharacteristic kindness. Flora shook her head.

"No, Auntie," Flora said confidently. "Just curious as to what it will feel like. Does it hurt much?"

"Oh yes," Camilla said fondly. "Quite a bit. But not for long. In just a jiffy, you won't feel anything more."



Both girls accepted that without comment or concern, and at Camilla's direction, they each pulled their hair back to fully expose their necks. Now fully nude, the ancient witch produced a curved dagger sanctified through the darkest arts from the pile of robes at her feet. She moved to stand behind Flora.

*"Flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood, nightmare of my nightmares. I reclaim that of myself which I gave to you. Die now so that we may be reunited once more."*

And with that, Camilla drew the dagger neatly across Flora's throat. The girl gave a gurgle of pain and surprise, but she didn't fight back, not even as her life's blood poured down her bare chest. Then, Camilla shoved the dying girl into the waiting pool, and soon, blood billowed out across the bubbling water, tinting the pool red. Hestia watched her twin's death impassively, and then she leaned her own head back without a care as Camilla moved behind her and repeated the ritual on the other twin. Soon, Hestia's corpse was floating next to her sister's ... until, after a few moments, the two dead children *began to dissolve* into the warm waters of the pool.

When Camilla was satisfied that the waters of the Spawning Pool were of the right consistency, she took a moment to lick the dagger clean of blood before setting it aside. Then, she gingerly stepped down into the pool herself. The hideous nude crone made her way to the center of the pool and slowly lowered herself beneath the waters before coming to rest on the bottom without a hint of buoyancy. She stretched out her legs and arms and laid herself out flat surface beneath her. Then, she opened her eyes and peered up unblinkingly through the blood-tinged waters of the Spawning Pool as she absorbed all the knowledge the Carrow Twins had acquired since their Sorting.

As the old year was reborn into the new one, she continued to stare without blinking beneath the tainted waters of the Pool. Above her, the light-giving pods that hung from the ceiling pulsed with the beating of her heart. Each was three to five feet long, big enough to hold anything from a toddler to a young adult. And clearly visible through their slimy translucent surfaces, each of the pods *did* house someone: a nude female body held in stasis in a fetal position until fully ripened. There were more than a dozen pods, each containing the body of a girl – the *same* girl at varying early moments in her life between early childhood and puberty. And as Camilla studied the memories of the dead twins and reminisced about how she had once been a little girl *just like* Flora and Hestia, two of the pods began to shine brighter than the others. Smaller pods containing the torpid bodies of two young girls who looked like Flora and Hestia Carrow. *Exactly* like them because they had, in fact, been grown to replace them at Hogwarts when the time was right.

Two "children" borne of blood-soaked nightmares and swaddled in stolen human skin-suits, already eager to return to Hogwarts and continue their predecessors' work.

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**1 January 1994**

**Potter Manor**

**1:00 p.m.**

On New Year's Day, Harry Potter slept in for one of the few times in his entire life. While he was normally an early riser still, the New Year's Eve Ball the night before had been exhausting. He'd stayed up until nearly 3 and gotten to enjoy his first taste of champagne (Jim had "snuck" off to a private room with a bottle for a few of their friends – though Harry suspected that James knew and secretly approved).

Hermione had begged off this year, wanting to do something "Mugglish" with her parents for New Year's, and, of course, Theo immediately turned down the invitation, saying "No one wants to see a party ruined by an ugly scene, let alone a lynch mob."

But the Greengrass sisters came, as did the Patil sisters. Padma and Parvati seemed to be getting along much better since Parvati's near-death experience the previous summer. Harry gallantly danced with all four of them, though Padma and Parvati spent most of their dance-time with Jim and Ron, the latter of whom seemed mildly uncomfortable with Parvati's obvious crush on her savior. The rest of the Weasleys came this year except for Fred and George. During their waltz, Ginny somewhat gleefully revealed to Harry that the Twins had been grounded for the rest of the Christmas holidays after George had slipped Fred a potion that made every hair on his body fall out and Fred retaliated with a hex that left George unable to speak except in vulgar limericks. Molly was so furious with them both that she left them at home in their room - which, by the way, now included a ward line running right down the center of the room that prevented either of them crossing over into the other's "territory."

After Harry finally woke the next morning, he enjoyed a leisurely brunch with Artie and the Potters before Flooing back to Longbottom Manor. Jim and James had both all but begged him to stay the night and leave for Hogwarts from their house the next day. But Harry demurred, saying that he still had to finish enchanting his broom for Ancient Runes. Lily praised him for his conscientiousness, but both James and Jim seemed baffled that anyone would turn down more time spent on a broom in favor of broom-related homework.

Harry and Artie Flooed straight back to the Longbottom home, where Harry gratefully thanked Artie for coming with him for Christmas. Artie gave him a hug and wished him a happy New Year before leaving through the Floo for his own home. Then, Harry counted to ten before throwing another pinch of powder into the fireplace.

"12 Grimmauld Place," he called out.

Seconds later, Harry stepped out of the fireplace (nearly tripping in the process) into the parlor of Sirius and Regulus's home. The rest of the Azakaban conspirators (including new members Rufus, Buck, and Bellatrix, though Marcus was still at Hogwarts) were waiting for him. There was a table in the center of the room upon which sat a golden chalice that Rufus and Lucius were examining cautiously as if it were a sleeping cobra. Next to the Cup lay the group's last remaining Basilisk fang.

"Is that it?" he asked immediately.

"No, Mr. Potter," Lucius said without looking up. "It's an entirely unrelated golden cup that I found while antiquing in Paris."

Harry sniffed at Malfoy's sarcasm and then hissed as softly as he could (though not softly enough to stop several people from flinching).

*"Mark, do you sssense anything?"*

*"Yesss, my massster. I sssense the presssence of the Creator. He ssslumbers within yon cup. I hear it sssinging to us."*

"Uh-huh," Harry said before speaking aloud in English.

"Mark says he can hear it singing."

Several of the other conspirators looked at one another nervously.

"Um, I don't hear anything, Harry," said Neville.

"Neither do I, Nev. I'm just passing the message along – the fragment of a Dark Mark that I presently have resting in the small of my back says he can hear it singing." Harry paused to listen to words only he could hear or comprehend. "Well, I suppose *humming* would be more accurate."

The young Parselmouth moved forward cautiously. The Cup was simpler and less ornate than he'd anticipated. No jewels, just a simple gold chalice with several dancing badgers carved into the surface as filigree. At the basis were two words in Latin: *Vinum Bibistus*.

"What does Vinum Bibistus mean?" he asked.

"It means *drink wine*," Sirius said with a laugh. "I might have considered Hufflepuff as an option for my Sorting if I'd known old Helga was such a party girl."

A few others chuckled along with Sirius, but Lucius suddenly studied the inscription more intently.

"*Drink wine*," he finally said with a sad expression. "*This is life eternal. This is all that youth will give you. It is the season for wine, roses and drunken friends. Be happy for this moment. This moment is your life.*"

He looked up at the assembled group, all of who were staring at him in confusion.

"It's from the *Rubaiyat*, a collection of 11th century poetry written by a Persian wizard known to the Muggles as Omar

Khayyam. According to my research, in her youth, the German witch who later took the name Helga Hufflepuff traveled extensively in the Middle and Far East and took Khayyam as a lover for a time. Her own legendary Cup was based off the fabled Seven-Ringed Cup of Jamshid, about which Khayyam wrote many poems, most of which were removed from Muggle libraries by the Statute of Secrecy."

"Huh, learn something new every day," said Buck. "So, do we know what the fabled Seven-Ringed Cup of ... Jam-Shed ... actually did? Maybe that will tell us more about this thing."

"Very little is known about Jamshid or his Cup. Jamshid himself was a sorcerer-king of Ancient Persia, but most tales about him are less history and more legend. Even less is known definitively about the Seven-Ringed Cup, but the consensus view is that it duplicated some of the properties of the Philosopher's Stone of Nicolas Flamel. It could transform wine into a potion similar to the Elixir of Life, one that could cure all injuries mental and physical and both restore youth and extend longevity. I don't know whether Helga's own Cup had the same properties, but she was the longest-lived of the Founders, dying at well over 200 years of age. And she supposedly maintained a youthful appearance until her last few years before aging quite rapidly. This was only after the death of her fourth husband, Ambroginus Blacksmith, the founder of what later became House Smith. He was by all accounts the most beloved husband of her paramours, and not long after his death, Helga began to age rapidly before dying. I can only assume that grief caused her to voluntarily stop drinking from the Cup, even assuming its magic was the true source for her long life. By that time, she was also the last of the Founders, having outlived the other three by decades, and unlike the Flamel, she had no one to share eternity with. The Cup

passed to Ambroginus's heirs, but the process for accessing its magical properties did not. It has been nothing more than a priceless heirloom since then, whatever magic it held before."

"Wait," said Regulus, "Helga Hufflepuff was an immortal witch until she killed herself?"

Lucius shrugged. "If our conjectures are true, then she voluntarily ceased taking a potion that had extended her life perhaps indefinitely. I suppose that can be considered a form of suicide."

"And now He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has that same longevity," Augusta said with resignation.

"Most likely. Tom Riddle, after all would have been in his late 50's at the time of his apparent destruction, but he seemed to be much younger. Of course, even someone who regularly imbibes the Elixir of Life can still die, simply not from old age or disease."

"If ... if we could ... remove You-Know-Who's soul piece from the Cup," Neville asked nervously. "Would it be safe to use? You know ... for healing and stuff?"

Augusta reached over to squeeze his hand, but Scrimgeour shook his head in the negative.

"No, my boy, the risk is too great. I don't think we should hesitate to destroy any of these things when they come into our possession." Next to him, Lucius nodded his assent.

"Still," Sirius said while staring intently at the Cup, "Neville may have a point. I mean, not only is this thing genuine Hogwarts history, but it's a powerful healing device. Is it

right for us to simply destroy it without even trying to purify it?"

"I was the one who brought it here," said Bellatrix firmly. "I want to destroy it to revenge myself on the Dark Lord for what was done to me. *But* I also want to make atonement to the people I hurt while I was under his control."

She looked over to Neville. "I know who you were thinking of when you asked your question, Heir Longbottom, and I agree with you." Then, she turned back to the group. "I think Neville and Sirius are right. We should not destroy the Cup so long as there's a chance it can be used for good!"

"If nothing else," Regulus interrupted. "We should at least hold onto the Cup to determine if it's possible to communicate with it. I mean, we only found out about the Cup because Harry was able to speak with the Locket. And we have no idea where any other horcruxes are, so if we can't learn anything from the Cup, we're at a dead end."

"I cannot articulate how stupid an idea it is to try to *interrogate* a powerful magical artifact that is housing a piece of the Dark Lord's soul!" Snape spat out.

"And I'll thank you not to call my son-in-law stupid, pally!" Buck growled angrily. "I think he may be onto something. Let the boy try to talk with the Cup and see what happens!"

At that point, everyone in room began to argue about the disposition of Hufflepuff's Cup, but Harry was distracted by a soft hiss only he could hear.

*"Massster! The sssong growsss louder!"*

Harry did not share this warning with the rest of the group. Instead, he took a moment to observe the increasingly



angry debate and see who was on each side. Then, he stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled loudly enough to silence all argument. He moved closer to the Cup and addressed the group.

"Instead of arguing, why don't we put it to a vote? Everyone who wants to hold off on destroying the Cup for whatever reason, raise your hand." Neville, Bella, Sirius, Regulus, and Buck all held up their hands. Harry nodded.

"Okay, now raise your hand if you want to destroy the Cup now, this very second." Snape, Rufus, Lucius, and Augusta all raised their hands.

"Gran!" Neville exclaimed as if betrayed.

"I'm sorry, Neville," Augusta said contritely, "but the risk is too great. Your parents were targeted by You-Know-Who *because* they had declared themselves to be his enemy. Frank would never forgive me if I hesitated to destroy a piece of his dark soul, even for a chance to heal both him and your mother."

"What about you, Harry?" Regulus asked. "Right now, it's 5-4 in favor of holding off. Either you vote with us and make it 6-4, or you vote to destroy it and we're tied."

Lucius snorted. "Shall we send someone for young Master Flint to cast a tie-breaker?"

"No," Harry said. "That won't be necessary."

Suddenly, before anyone could react, he shoved Regulus aside, nearly knocking him to the floor. Then, in a flash, he snatched up the Basilisk fang and plunged it into the Cup. Instantly, a deafening scream of pain and fury blasted out of the cursed chalice, followed by a billowing black cloud that

rose up to cover the ceiling over the table. Bellatrix screamed and clutched her hands over her ears to block out the noise. Neville, Buck, and the Black brothers were also deeply affected, though not to such extremes. The other wizards present, though frightened, still had the wit to point their wands at the cloud even as angry red eyes appeared in the heart of it to glare at the room. But before anyone could cast a single spell, the malevolent scream faded away and the cloud dissolved, the blood-red eyes simply fading away.

"Bloody hell," Regulus muttered shakily as Snape rushed to a quivering Sirius to force a Calming Draught down his throat.

"Harry!" Neville cried out reproachfully. "How could you! You were the one who wanted a vote in the first place!"

"Yes," Harry answered without taking his eyes off the melted hunk of slag that had been the fabled Cup of Helga Hufflepuff. "And the results of that vote were as follows: Everyone in the room who has strong Occlumency defenses wanted to destroy the horcrux immediately, while everyone who *didn't* was making excuses for keeping it around indefinitely until we could figure out how to *use* it."

A chill descended over the room as the five who'd voted to keep the Cup intact realized to their horror the subtlety of the horcrux's manipulation. Buck let out a low whistle.

"Well," he said. "That's bloody creepy, that is."

"Indeed," said Snape. "But on the bright side, that's three down and ..." He paused and grimaced. "And we still have absolutely no idea how many horcruxes there are, do we?"

An uncomfortable silence answered his question.

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**Potter Manor**  
**The Quafflebash Court**  
**4:40 p.m.**

Two-man Quafflebash was even more challenging than the team version, and even though James was taking it easy on Jim, the Boy-Who-Lived presently felt more like the Klutz-Who-Couldn't-Fly. As dinner time drew near, James finally took pity on his son, and the two came in for a landing.

"Well, *that* was miserable," Jim said ruefully.

"Don't feel so bad, Jim," his father replied while putting a hand on the boy's shoulder. "You have incredible gifts for Seeking, but none of those gifts apply to tight maneuvering, let alone bouncing a Quaffle off your head. If this was broom-racing instead, you'd blow the straw off my broom."

James paused and looked thoughtful. "I wonder how much it would cost to put in a broom-racing course out back." Then, he smirked. "Oh well, I'm rich. I'm sure I can afford it."

Jim laughed. "I bet Harry would like broom-racing. That may be the only part of Quidditch we're both good at. Of course," he said meaningfully, "he does have an unfair advantage what with that Firebolt he has. Hint, hint!"

"We'll talk about it for your birthday. Until then, I guess you'll just have to talk your brother into letting you borrow his broom."

"Gee, thanks Dad," the boy said sarcastically before turning more serious. "So, Harry's really coming to live with us full-time next summer? No more lawyers or chaperones? He'll just be a Potter like the rest of us?"

James rubbed his fingers through his son's hair. "Just like the rest of us." Then, he turned serious himself. "You know, Jim, I made a lot of mistakes with Harry. A *lot*. And I'm going to do everything I can to fix them. Are you going to be okay with it if it seems like I'm showing him favoritism from time to time? You know I love you both, right?"

"Of course, Dad," Jim said easily. "And *I've* been getting along with Harry just fine, I'll have you know. Are *you* sure you're going to be okay with having a Slytherin son and Heir?"

Despite himself, James winced. "I won't lie. It's going to be hard on me at times, letting go of my ... *feelings*, I guess, for Slytherins. It's because of the way I was raised. And ... the things I ... know." His voice trailed off at the end, and his expression grew frustrated. And perhaps a bit haunted.

"The things you know?" Jim asked.

"Forget it, son," James said, shaking his head. "There are things you and Harry will both need to know someday, but not until you've come of age. Hell, I didn't know them until well after I turned 21. Though, I promise you and Harry will both know before then. I won't repeat my parents' mistakes of waiting until it's too late. And I can only hope you can both understand and forgive me for the things I felt that I had to do for the Greater Good."

Jim looked at him quizzically. "Ookay, that's not cryptic and spooky at all."

"It's alright," James responded. "It's ... something Potters have to deal with. And hopefully, you and your brother will handle it better than I did." He flicked his wand for a wordless Tempus. "And on that note, we both need to go

wash up. Supper's at 6. And you *really* need to change into fresh clothes."

Jim grinned. "You just don't like my lucky shirt is all."

"To be honest, I'm not sure *what* to think about a shirt that says '*Supreme Git of the Universe*' that you insist on wearing all the time. You don't wear that around the dorm, do you?"

"Not ... *all* the time," he said evasively. "Hey, its *ironic*! And like Harry said, we Potter men need something to keep us humble."

"Harry said that?" James said in surprise.

"It's okay. He specifically included himself in that statement."

James laughed. "You should return the favor. For your next joint birthday, you can get *him* a t-shirt with something equally ... *ironic*."

"Like what?" Jim asked cheekily.

"Oh, I dunno. '*Slimy Snake Numero Uno*,' or something like that."

"Pfft," the boy scoffed. "Snakes aren't slimy, Dad! And Harry needs something classier than that for the Slytherin dorms." He stopped for a second just a few feet from the door as inspiration struck.

"I know! How about ... *The Prince of Slytherin*!" he said with a laugh.

Silence.

Jim turned back to look at his father. Then, he paused uncertainly. For James Potter seemed almost *petrified* with an expression of absolute horror etched on his face.

"Dad?" the boy said cautiously.

"*Where ... where did you ... Jim, where did hear about that?*" James gasped out as if he were suddenly out of breath.

"Dad? What's wrong?" Jim said with concern and mounting unease as he stepped closer to his father. He had never seen the man look this way before. It was almost ... *frightening*. Then, before the boy could react, James rushed forward, grabbed him by the shoulders, and shook him forcefully.

"ANSWER ME, DAMMIT!" James roared in a sudden and terrible fury. "WHERE DID YOU HEAR ABOUT THE PRINCE OF SLYTHERIN!"

"Dad! Stop it! You're hurting me!"

James ignored his son's cries and continued to hysterically ask about the words Jim had used.

"IS IT HARRY?! IS HE THE PRINCE OF SLYTHERIN? WHY DO YOU THINK THAT?! WHAT DO YOU KNOW?!"

Finally, Jim's martial arts training took over. He twisted his shoulders while grabbing James's arms with his own. With a sudden twist, he tossed the older man to the ground before turning and running for the door, calling for help as he did. Before he could reach it, James yanked out his wand, and sealed the door shut with a single angry slash.

*"LISTEN TO ME, JIM!" he yelled. "YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON! YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT'S AT STAKE!"*

James's hand shook madly as he pointed his wand at his younger son while scrambling up to his feet. The elder Potter was so overcome with emotion that Jim might have been able to take him in a duel ... if the boy hadn't left his own wand sitting on his nightstand.

*"Dad! Just ... just calm down! Tell me what's going! Just explain it to me!"*

By this point, James was crying and pulling on his hair almost hard enough to tear it out from the roots. His mouth opened and closed as he struggled to speak.

*"... he's going to kill us all, Jim," the man finally whispered in a delirium. "The fire that burns cold! Harry's going to bring everything crashing down around us. And it's because I was too weak and stupid. You have to help me stop him." James's voice broke as he begged his son. "Please ... TELL ME WHAT YOU KNOW!"*

Jim swallowed painfully. He had no idea why the title "Prince of Slytherin" should have such an effect, but it seemed to have driven his father mad. He looked around desperately, but there was no way out, and for all his training with Remus Lupin, none of it helped in a big empty room where there was no cover, when he had no wand to fight with, and when his opponent, even in his current condition, was a well-trained Auror. Jim shook his head sadly.

*"Dad, whatever is going on, we can all face it together ... as a family. But don't ask me to turn against Harry because I*

won't do it. I love you, but I won't help you hurt Harry any more than this family already has."

The boy reached out to his father, as gently and reassuringly as he could, as if trying to calm a mad dog. Tears poured down the elder Potter's face. The man's whole body shook as if he were on the verge of a fit, but his wand was still pointed firmly at Jim.

"Now, please. Dad. I know you don't want to hurt me ... *or Harry*. Just unlock the door, so I can go get Mom. Then, we can all sit down together and...."

**"*IMPERIO!*"**

Jim had just enough time to feel a sense of shock and betrayal at his own father's use of an Unforgivable Curse against him. Then, all he knew was a wonderful floating sensation that erased both his fears and his power to resist.

The room was silent, save for the painful gasps of James Potter as he stood transfixed in shock at the line he'd just crossed. And in that instant, he understood why the Imperius Curse was deemed Unforgivable. Because he had just imperiused one son in order to use him against the other, and for that, James thought a life sentence to Azkaban was exactly what he deserved.

The seconds ticked by in agonizing slowness, but still James did not release the spell. He simply closed his eyes and let the self-loathing pass through him. Then, he opened his eyes again, now with fresh purpose.

"You will answer my questions," he said coldly. "Where did you hear the phrase "*Prince of Slytherin*" and what does it have to do with Harry?"



"I heard it from Ron," Jim said in a flat emotionless voice. "He had a flashback to when Tom Riddle was possessing him in the Chamber of Secrets. He still doesn't know any details, but he remembered bits and pieces of Tom and Harry talking about it. That Tom thought Harry was unworthy to become the Prince. That's all either of us know about it."

"Tom ... *Voldemort* was talking to Harry about becoming the Prince of Slytherin?!"

James's vision began to swim. He feared he was in danger of passing out. Or perhaps merely throwing up. Then, he shook his head and focused on Jim who was starting to fight off the Curse. A small part of James was proud of his son for showing such resistance, but he had no time for such emotions. James redoubled his focus on controlling the boy.

"You will forget all this. You will leave this room right now. Go and get cleaned up. Forget everything about what was said or done after we finished our game. Forget you even mentioned the Prince of Slytherin to me."

He hesitated for a moment before continuing.

"When you return to Hogwarts, you will avoid Harry because he is dangerous to be around. If you see or hear of anything at all suspicious involving Harry, you will contact me at once. Go now."

Without a word, Jim turned and headed for the door, and James dismissed his locking spell as the boy reached for the handle. Once Jim had left and the door closed behind him, James's legs finally buckled and he dropped to his knees, his wand landing on the floor beside him. Slowly, he crumpled to the ground and started pawing at his collar when he found it impossible to breathe. His heart pounded

furiously in his chest, and the sound of it rushed through his ears like the roar of a dragon.

Deep in the throes of a panic attack, James desperately tried to gasp out the one word that could help him. "*El ... El ... Elmo!*"

Instantly, there was a soft pop, and the Potter's chief house elf was at his side.

"Master James!" the tiny creature gasped. "What is the matter! Here, let me summon Mistress Lily!"

"*N-n-o!*" James managed to get out. "*Bring ... calming ... draught!*"

"But Master ...."

"*Do ... do as I say! Now! ... please!*"

Elmo nodded and popped away only to return just a few seconds later with a small vial that James snatched out of his hand and drank at once. After just a few seconds, the wizard's heart rate slowed, his breathing returned to normal, and his uncontrollable trembling ceased.

"Master James," Elmo said tentatively. "You are unwell. Can Elmo go and fetch Mistress Lily now?"

James turned to look at Elmo with a dull expression, as if he'd been awoken suddenly and was not sure if he was dreaming or not.

"Listen to me carefully, Elmo, and obey me," he said in a thick slow voice. "I *order* you to say *nothing* about this to Lily, to Jim, or to anyone else. You have served this house faithfully since I was a child, but I swear I will give you

clothes if anyone else learns about the condition in which you just found me. Do you understand?"

The house elf nodded fearfully, as his eyes widened like saucers. At James's command, Elmo popped away, leaving the wizard alone on the floor of the Quafflebash court. He leaned back until he was lying on the cold hard floor of the court and put his hands over his face. The Calming Draught had ended the worst of his panic attack, but it did nothing for the overpowering dread that poured over James once more, a dread that had been at the root of nearly every bad decision he'd made since 1981. Ever since the day he first heard the damnable words of Cassandra Trewlaney from an orb he happened to find in his father's private safe.

***This is how our world will end -  
In a cold but all-consuming fire.***

## Chapter End Notes

AN 1: I'm sorry, but I must admit defeat when it comes to scheduling updates. For the immediate future, I will update as I can. Future chapters will still appear first on my website and will be available free to followers of my Discord server. They will be published there in chunks which will be merged into completed chapters and then posted here when they are finished and edited. I'm sorry for any frustrations that my publishing schedule (or lack thereof) may cause.

AN 2: Casting Call!

The part of Dan Granger will be played by Bradley Walsh at age 40.

The part of Emma Granger has not yet been cast, but I'm leaning towards Rachel Weisz.

The part of Gaston Legard will be played by Gordon

Ramsey.

The part of the snooty maitre d' will be played by obscure American character actor Jonathan Schmock, who played a similar role in Ferris Bueller's Day Off.

AN 3: Special thanks to my editors from the POS-Editorial channel on Discord: akitcougar, Asmund, curedetepes, dragoria, Dom\_the\_rock, Emily Elizabeth, FeatheryMinx, Gloweye, HeidiWolf, INSTICNT\_Klutz, Ladyshjwblack, Miss Anne Thrope, Prince of Conspiracy, ProfessionalDragonslayer, Pokeflute, slytherin's daughter, TrendyTreky, nispeed, vibhavi, Vin5

AN 4: Hermione's French is supposed to say something to the effect of "I am fluent in French, thank you. I'll have the Salad Nicoise and the Beef Shanks."

AN 5: Check my author page for links to my Discord page, the POS TV Tropes Page, the POS Wiki, and the P\*\*\*\*\*n page for my original, non-Harry Potter writing.

# The Month of January

## Chapter Notes

### SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and no thinly disguised allegories about tolerance. Oh, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### ***Harry Potter and the Death Eater Menace***

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***Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling I make no claim to ownership.***

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## ***Chapter 33: The Month of January***

***1 January 1994  
Nott Manor***

Barty Crouch, Jr. ("Mr. January," to the other members of his somewhat notorious social club) rose from his comfortable bed in his guest room at Nott Manor. After a quick bath and other ablutions, he threw his meager belongings into a bag. He did *not* toss in his Death Eater robes and mask, as there was a non-negligible chance his bag would be examined by a foreign customs agent in the near future. It was bad enough he looked like a dead man walking (literally), though he was confident of not being recognized where he was going. Once dressed, the Death Eater made his way down to the dining hall where Nott's decrepit elf already had breakfast ready.

When he'd first arrived, the old windbag had tried to subtly bully him into eating a half a grapefruit every morning, but Barty put a stop to that quickly. Even among the Death Eaters, Mr. January had a reputation, and a hearty appetite was the least unpleasant thing about it. Mr. Nimrod, on the other hand, brought nothing to the group save wealth and basic competency as a dark wizard. Which was enough to get him in the door, but Mr. January knew who was a *real* Death Eater and who was a poseur with a tattoo. Nott was definitely in the latter category.

That didn't stop Narcissa from flirting shamelessly with the old bore since, after all, they *did* need lots of money at the moment if they were to proceed with the Master's plans. On some level, Mr. January knew he should be jealous, as he remembered (empirically, at least) the pleasure of sharing a bed with Miss Direction and all the veela-stolen allure she could bring to bear. He didn't think Mr. Nimrod had enjoyed such pleasures yet, but it was still a possibility. If it happened, January thought it would be the end of Mr. Nimrod – some men weren't built to handle such stress. As for jealousy, he'd lost such a capacity years before along with any interest in (or indeed, belief in) love.

"I do wish you didn't have to go, Narcissa," said the besotted old wizard to the object of his increasingly obsessive desire. "It's like you've only just gotten here!"

"I know, my precious, I know," she purred. "But our Lord has tasks for us all that must be fulfilled. Tasks for *all of us*. Dear Barty and I have business abroad that will take us away for some time. *You*, my sweet, have business closer to home."

She reached out to stroke his cheek, and his entire body shuddered.

"What ... what does our Lord command?" he stammered.

She stepped back. "Despite the best efforts of our valiant Auror corps, no one has thus far found out whatever happened to the brave members of our circle who were removed from Azkaban prison. Among them are my beloved sister and in-laws, as well as our dear friend, Mr. Nemo."

Her face assumed a contemptuous glare. "And last ... and also least ... is my cousin Sirius, who was never one of us. After all this time, he still stands between me and control of the House of Black." She snorted. "And after all the trouble I went to putting him in Azkaban in the first place! Such temerity!"

She moved closer again and gripped his arms like a vice so that his eyes didn't roll back up into his head again just from her proximity.

"While we're gone, my sweet. I should be so very grateful if you would do for me what the Aurors apparently cannot. Find the Azkaban escapees for our Lord. If you do, he will reward you handsomely."

She leaned in closer and whispered in his ear. "And if you would also do me the courtesy of *killing Sirius Black*, then *I* will reward you in ways that our Lord *never* could."

Then, she stepped back once more and turned to Barty, hoping against hope that Tiberius Nott (a) would remember her instructions and (b) wouldn't faint again from the strength of her allure.

"Barty, my poppet. Finish your toast. Our portkey to Albania awaits."

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## ***2 January 1994***

### ***The Hogwarts Express***

As Harry Potter made his way down the corridor of the train, he nodded politely to Michael Proudfoot as he passed by. He *almost* called the young uniformed Auror by name, but he was pretty sure he'd never actually met the real Auror Proudfoot as opposed to other people posing as the man through various means. Regardless, after the incident from the previous September when he and Jim were both nearly kissed by a Dementor, the Ministry had decided to be more sensible about protecting the train, and so Proudfoot and three other Aurors would be riding along the whole way to Scotland. He hadn't recognized any of the other three, but he assumed they would be able to cast a Patronus if needed, and thus soul-sucking would be off the agenda.

Which meant that Harry's only concern at the moment was figuring out why his twin brother was suddenly so standoffish.

Harry and Neville had met up with Jim and the Weasley clan on Platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$  as usual, and on this occasion, they all



passed through without incident. But while Harry's relations with the Weasleys were all cordial (even Ron!), Jim seemed oddly ill at ease around him. Not hostile, exactly, but ... cautious. Harry honestly had no idea what he could have possibly done to Jim in the space of *a day* to render his brother so visibly suspicious of him, so the young Slytherin just added it to his ever-expanding list of things to look into when an opportunity presented itself. He also asked Hermione to keep an eye on Jim, and the witch agreed.

About an hour after leaving London, Harry excused himself to visit the loo. On his way back, however, the boy noticed something in the corridor that was decidedly unexpected.

A fish.

Specifically, a rather brilliantly-scaled salmon, and while that would be an odd thing to come across on a train in any circumstances, it was particularly so when the fish in question was floating in mid-air and swimming around in a tight figure-eight. Despite himself, Harry moved closer to study the strange sight. When he was within a few feet, he suddenly came to his senses, shook his head vigorously, and popped out his wand as he looked around for the source of the supernaturally-distracting conjuration. Instantly, a door to his right slid open, and a gruff voice called out.

"I stop your lessons for three weeks, and you get so weak-willed that a simple Fascination Fish befuddles you for a whole eight seconds?" snarled Mad-Eye Moody from inside the compartment. "A Charm Aurors use to befuddle *Muggles* while they clean up Statute of Secrecy breaches? Pathetic! If I were a dark wizard, I could have killed you five times over! CONSTANT VIGILANCE!"

Harry's eyes widened in surprise before they immediately narrowed. "**HOMENUM REVELIO**." There was a flash of light, but no one other than the ex-auror was present in the compartment, and (absent Polyjuice or Metamorphmagic) the man was who he appeared to be. Then, Harry lifted his chin as he regarded the man.

"How many steps are there in the stairs leading down to your trunk?" he asked.

"Fifteen, the last time you went down it. I reconfigure my trunk regularly. Why did I kick you out of your last lesson?"

Harry winced in embarrassment and looked away. "Because I was an insensitive git," he finally muttered. Moody snorted softly at that and gestured for Harry to enter the compartment.

"I feel like I should give a long, heartfelt, and overly-effusive apology," Harry said as he closed the door and took a seat. "But I also feel like you'll just interrupt me three seconds in with a sarcastic comment about how you don't care for touchy-feeling stuff."

"Good," the man answered. "I'm relieved to know we can just skip that part. Sentiment makes me queasy. So let's cut to the chase. You betrayed my trust. You did something you knew I didn't want you to do and without asking. You violated my privacy and saw things that I've never allowed anyone to see outside of a DMLE-mandated mind healer who took an oath of patient confidentiality."

"Sir, I would be happy to swear any oaths...."

"Potter, *shut up* and let me finish," Moody interrupted irritably. "Now, despite all that, I also have to acknowledge that *I* was the one who brought the memory vial in question

and left it unattended while I went to the crapper. The truth, Potter, is that I must have gone back and forth a dozen times over whether or not to let you see that memory before you took the decision out of my hand. And while I freely admit I was *pissed* at what you did, after I calmed down a bit, I had to face facts. By that point, I had spent *months* prepping you to face Voldemort. The whole *point* of showing you those other memories was to give you the knowledge and insight to survive an encounter with the Dark Tosser or, failing that, at least make a decent showing. And part of my lessons involved teaching you to think outside the box, to look for the third option, to seize whatever advantage you possibly could. I might have been angry about you looking at those memories without my permission. But if you *hadn't* looked, it's just possible I would have been *disappointed* instead that you let something as stupid as '*respect for my privacy*' stop you from claiming information that might one day save your life."

Harry stared almost slack-jawed at his mentor's words, as Moody leaned back in his seat.

"So, now that I've *provisionally* forgiven you, what did you *learn* from those memories?"

The boy blinked at the sudden question. "That Voldemort is a monster who needs killing?"

Moody barked out a guttural laugh. "Hell's bells, boy. I'd have assumed you'd know that much without needing to see anyone's memories. What did you *learn*?"

Harry closed his eyes and reviewed the memory of Moody's horrific encounter with Lord Voldemort. Then, for just a second, in place of Moody's lover, partner, and surviving

family, Harry envisioned Neville, Hermione, Theo, Jim, Regulus, and all the other people he'd improbably come to care about stuck to those walls instead of the ones that Moody had loved.

"I learned that there are things Voldemort can do to you that are *worse* than killing you," he said quietly.

Moody nodded. "Good. That's the proper lesson." He reached into a pocket and pulled out a small book.

"This is the current Auror training manual. Don't get caught with it. It's not illegal for a civilian to have it, but it would raise questions I don't want to answer. In particular, if you look on page 74, you'll find a collection of Charms and techniques that culminate in mastering the Disillusionment Charm. As I recall, you'd expressed an interest in that. Please don't do stupid things with it like sneak out after curfew or go wandering into the girls' shower."

Harry laughed. "I won't. So, does this mean we can start lessons again?" he asked hopefully.

"No," Moody answered. "But not because I'm still mad at you. Rather, it's because I'll be leaving Hogsmeade in a few days. Actually, I'll be leaving Britain. Albus ... well, he's got some stuff he needs looking into. I can't give you any details, but broadly, it's in line with *that matter* you told me about last summer regarding our snaky little friend. Hopefully, when I'm back, I can fill you in, but right now, you're on your own."

The boy nodded and accepted that cryptic explanation. The two wizards talked for another half-hour before Harry finally rose to return to his friends' compartment. They shook hands firmly before wishing each other good luck. It would be quite some time before the two met up again.

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## ***The Caretaker's Office***

### ***Later that night...***

"Aaaaaaaah!" said Jim Potter as he opened his mouth wide as if a Healer were looking down his throat. Remus Lupin rolled his eyes but said nothing as he carefully stuck his wand inside the boy's mouth and touched the Mandrake leaf that had been affixed to the roof of it. With a whisper, he dispelled the Sticking Charm before gently levitating the leaf out of the boy's mouth. Carefully, he placed it into a jar which he'd already spelled with a Stasis Charm.

"Right, the leaf looks okay," the caretaker said after a moment's examination. "I'll start gathering the other ingredients for the potion. Well, the *traditional* potion ingredients, anyway. The brewing process must begin under the new moon which is two weeks away. At that time, you will have to provide the rest of the ingredients. Mainly biological material."

"Like what?" Jim asked.

"A lock of hair. A fingernail clipping." Remus paused and grimaced as if mildly embarrassed. "Certain ... bodily fluids."

"What, like spit or something?"

"... or something. We'll talk more when we get to that point in the process." The man turned to place the jar in a desk drawer which he then locked magically. "After that point, the potion must brew for a full month at least before it can be drunk ... and to be effective, it must also be consumed during a thunderstorm, so we'll have to wait for the appropriate weather conditions."

"And then I'll be an Animagus?" Jim said excitedly.

Remus chuckled. "Oh no, Jim, I'm afraid it won't quite be that easy. After you consume the potion, it will be weeks, perhaps months, before you develop your form. On the bright side, the development process will happen in your dreams which will be plagued by disturbing imagery of your animal self. You should stock up on Pepper-Up Potions because you will probably lose a lot of sleep until you find your form."

"... and that's the *bright side*?" the boy asked dubiously.

Remus shrugged. "Better than the alternative of doing all that while you're *awake and around other people*. Your father once spontaneously sprouted a small but noticeable set of antlers that he couldn't get rid of for two whole days. We managed to persuade everyone that it was a potions accident."

He paused and smiled at the memory. "In retrospect, it's honestly amazing how many things we passed off as '*potions accidents*' when we were at school. I'm sure everyone thought the Marauders were the worst potioners in Hogwarts history. But I digress. The technique we're using will eliminate the chance of uncontrolled physical changes to your body, though there may be some mental side effects."

"Like what?" Jim said with some concern. "We haven't really talked about side effects before."

"Oh, it shouldn't be anything major. If your animal form is a carnivore, you might develop a strong preference for meat over other foods. If it's a reptile, you might be more uncomfortable in cold environments. Though if I had to guess, I'd say a bird of some kind. I've seen you fly a broom,

and I'll be very surprised if your animal form doesn't take to the skies."

"But what if I don't have an animal form," Jim answered pensively. "Not everyone does, do they?"

"That's an interesting and unanswered question. The consensus view of British wizards is that the potential to become an Animagus is hereditary. Only a few people have the potential for the gift which is passed down from one's ancestors. Now, I *do* believe that the *ease* with which one can become an Animagus is influenced by heredity. Since your father is one, it should be easier for you to learn the knack than it was for him. Indeed, if there were enough people in your family tree who became Animagi, you might have already spontaneously achieved an animal form without even using this potion upon reaching puberty. Of course, in such a case, you would be more likely to adopt one of your ancestors' forms rather than one more unique to your own personality. If not a stag specifically than some other form of ungulate."

"Ungu-what?"

"A hoofed animal. But anyway, the Animagery instructors at Uagadou insist that *everyone* has the potential to become an Animagus. Unfortunately, most people who try will fail the process because they unconsciously reject their forms. In the end, they simply don't like what they think their form reveals about their own inner character and so refuse to acknowledge it."

"What do you mean?"

"For example, many people recoil from the realization that their spirit animal is some small woodland creature instead of the mighty predator they were imagining. Or worse, an

insect or a slug or something. And it's not uncommon for people who live great distances from the ocean to find that their spirit animals are saltwater fish, which makes the power largely useless." Remus assumed a fond expression. "As I recall, Peter was quite disappointed to learn that his form was that of a rat, though he eventually came to enjoy the advantages of his form. For one thing, he was small enough to fit through cracks in the walls, which meant he could use his form in relative freedom within the castle in ways that a large stag or an enormous black dog could not."

Jim nodded at that while shrugging off the sudden fear that he'd been doing all this work for the chance to gain the power to transform at will into a slug. "By the way, I hope it's not a problem, but Uncle Pete knows what I'm doing. He, um, smelled the Mandrake leaf at Christmas. But he says he won't tell Dad, though ... well, he kinda wants to meet my instructor and make sure you're on the up-and-up."

Remus laughed at that. "So long as he can maintain his discretion, I'm sure Malachi Sturgeon won't mind meeting your godfather. And depending on how the meeting goes, perhaps Remus Lupin won't mind getting reacquainted as well. And speaking of getting reacquainted, I don't know if he's told you, but Harry's decided to rejoin our Wu Xi Do sessions!"

"... great!" Jim replied with as much enthusiasm as he was capable of faking.

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***5 January 1994***  
***The Gryffindor Common Room***



Hermione Granger entered her dorm in high spirits. Earlier that day, the Ancient Runes class had met for the first time this term. But today, it had met in the Great Hall rather than its normal classroom. The weather outside was inclement (as was typical for Scotland in January) and the Great Hall was the only room in the castle large enough to accommodate flying brooms. Since the school year began back during the previous September, almost half the starting AR class had dropped, and it seemed likely that a few more might do so as well soon, most likely the two students who crashed to the stone floor due to faulty runecrafting. One of them was Daphne Greengrass, and to her own embarrassment, Hermione took a certain pleasure in the Slytherin girl's bloody nose (which was quickly healed by Professor Babbling).

It might have been petty for Hermione to hold a grudge against the Pureblood princess over a slight from so long ago, but the Gryffindor never claimed to be perfect.

On the other hand, Hermione could afford to be magnanimous since Professor Babbling judged her broom to be the best of the lot, thereby winning Hermione twenty points for Gryffindor. Any guilt she might have had over her unfair advantage on the assignment was quickly assuaged by furious glares from Greengrass, Padma Patil, and several other Pureblood students annoyed by the quality of her work.

*"To be fair," she thought, "none of them have called me a Mudblood recently. Or at least, not to my face."*

For their part, Harry and Blaise did not seem upset by Hermione's recognition. They were more astonished that she'd finally learned to fly a broom properly.

"Well, naturally, I would put some effort into flying a broom in this instance," she said breezily. "There were House points at stake!"

Blaise had laughed at that. Harry just crooked an eyebrow and quietly muttered the word "*weirdness*" before dropping the matter.

But Hermione Granger was never one to rest on her laurels, and once back in the Gryffindor Common, she immediately made her way to the person she was looking for.

"Fred?" she asked. "Do you have a moment? I'd like to ask your help for something."

The elder of the Weasley Twins looked up from what looked like Potions homework. He was sitting alone at a table with three different reference books open and looked more studious than anyone had ever seen him. A few of his peers were worried that he'd finally snapped and was looking into recipes for explosives.

"What kinda help, 'mione? I'm a bit busy at the mo'."

She glanced down at the books on the table. "Hmm. Actually, I think we might be able to help one another." She sat down across from him and cast a Muffliato Charm. "I can't help noticing that you've taken a stronger interest in Potions than in the past. Something to do with a bet against your brother, I gather?"

He frowned. "Something like that. It's my best subject, but I reckon I've got room to improve. Why?"

Instead of answering, the witch reached into her bag and pulled out several books which she placed on the table.

There looked to be about four or five bookmarks in each one. "These are bound copies of *Potioneers Monthly*. And the ones I've put marks next to are all articles published under the title H.B. Prince."

"Should I know that name?" Fred asked somewhat intrigued.

"You probably shouldn't actually, but I have it on the best of authority that H.B. Prince was the pseudonym of a certain professor here at Hogwarts. The one who teaches your best subject, in fact. And all of these articles contain tips and tricks for improving the quality of potion brews."

He perked up in surprise. "And you think that'll help me in his class? But it's the OWL I'm worried about. It's not like he writes the exam questions."

"No, but Professor Snape did receive an Outstanding on his Potions OWL, followed by an Outstanding on his NEWT, followed by a Potions Mastery before the age of twenty. Obviously, the man knew what he was doing."

Fred nodded. "And what do you want in exchange for this bit of insider information?"

She took a deep breath. "Something for my Ancient Runes group. We have a project that's due at the end of the year, and Anthony Goldstein and Su Li have come up with a wonderful idea, but we need people willing to test it for us. And after that business with Colin sprouting feathers, I know you have a ready supply of guinea pigs. I want you to recruit some of them for our project."

"What sort of project is it? I don't want to get anyone hurt."

"Really?!" she asked in genuine surprise. Hermione had not believed that the Twins were *ever* concerned with product safety in the past. She shook her head. "Not to worry. No one's going to be hurt by our project. Just," she coughed delicately, "knocked unconscious. A lot. On a regular basis."

Fred's eyes widened at that, but then he smirked and reached for one of the Potions books. It wasn't like he and George hadn't done worse to any of their test subjects.

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***14 January 1994***  
***The Potions Lab***

Severus Snape made his way around the classroom with extreme caution, as all of his natural paranoia was in overdrive. It was the Fifth Years today, Double Potions with Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs. That would be bad enough, but when he entered the class, he noticed something that sent out deafening alarm bells - the Weasley Terrors were now on opposite sides of the room. Terror One was now partnered with Lee Jordan, while Terror Two (the one who Minerva had outrageously elevated to prefect) was partnered with one of the female Gryffindor Chasers. Johnson, he thought, though Snape hadn't ever bothered to learn how to tell them apart.

Certain that the Terrors were up to something, Snape paced the room constantly trying unsuccessfully to keep them both in his field of view. The Fifth Years were brewing Draught of Peace today, and at the rate things were going, he might need to imbibe one himself. Then, near the end of class, the professor heard the sounds of urgent whispering from the first pair and descended on them like a vulture.

"Is there a problem, Mr. Jordan? Mr. ... Weasley?" Snape's voice trailed off at the sight of their potion which was the most exquisite shade of orange he'd seen in a student's potion in years.

"No, sir," Jordan stammered. "We, um, just had a disagreement about the instructions for the next step."

"Indeed, Mr. Jordan," Snape replied without taking his eyes off the cauldron. Idly, he noticed that Terror One, without looking away from him, reached over and turned the burner down one quarter-turn to exactly the right temperature. "And what *is* the next step?"

"Er, once it turns orange, we put in some powdered porcupine quills, I think?" Jordan stammered.

"And do you concur, Mr. Weasley?"

Terror One swallowed nervously before summoning up his Gryffindor courage and giving a firm answer.

"The instructions *do* say to add more powdered porcupine quills ... sir. Then, when it turns white, put the heat on low and add 7 drops of hellebore. But ..." he faltered slightly.

"Go on, Mr. Weasley."

"I think it would be better to mix two drops of hellebore into the powdered quills to make a paste and then dissolve that into the potion before adding the remaining five drops of liquid hellebore."

"You *think*, Mr. Weasley? And what do you *think* that would achieve?"

"Well, it would thicken the potion while also distributing the hellebore evenly through the whole mixture. That'll let you reduce it to a simmer faster before bottling."

Snape crooked an eyebrow. "And where did you come up with such an idea?"

Fred coughed into his hand. "From an article you wrote about Draught of Peace while you were working on your Mastery, Professor. I found it in a backissue of *Potioneers Monthly*."

Snape stared at the boy silently for nearly six seconds as a bead of sweat slowly crawled down the boy's forehead. "Proceed," he finally said.

Five minutes later, the students had bottled their potions for grading. As Fred placed his and Lee's vial on the desk, Snape picked it up, examined its color, and finally unstoppered it and sniffed it. Then, he looked up towards Fred. The man's mouth opened, closed, and opened again before he could force himself to speak.

"... *five points to Gryffindor*," he said barely above a whisper.

Fred grinned in delight and thanked Snape profusely before turning away. George, who was close enough to hear the point award, glared at his twin, who sneered victoriously in response.

Soon, Snape was alone in the classroom. He picked up the perfectly brewed potion once more and stared at it in obvious confusion, wondering if the world had gone mad.

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*20 January 1994*  
*Moaning Myrtle's Bathroom*  
*9:00 a.m.*

"Okay, we're here," said an annoyed Ginny Weasley with an equally annoyed Amy Wilkes and a dreamy Luna Lovegood standing next to her. "We're here wondering what in Merlin's name we're doing back in this miserable haunted loo. Because I am here to tell you that I'm *not* going back to the Chamber of Secrets."

Ginny and Amy were both grouchy on account of the early hour. It was a Sunday, and there had been a big party the night before to celebrate Slytherin's win over Ravenclaw the day before: 260-30, with Ginny catching the Snitch after causing "*that Pureblood cow Cho Chang*" to crash after a perfectly executed Wronski Feint.

Harry laughed. "No, no. No Chamber of Secrets today. We just needed a secure location for, well, for an experiment."

"An experiment?" Amy asked dubiously. "In a bathroom?"

"Well, it has the benefit of privacy," Theo Nott explained helpfully. "No one ever uses this bathroom for anything *precisely because* it's haunted. Add a Notice Me Not and a good locking Charm, and we can do whatever we need in here without anyone knowing."

"Except for the ghost," added Blaise. "But she doesn't count."

"OH SURE!" shrieked Moaning Myrtle from inside one of the stalls. "TALK ABOUT ME LIKE I DON'T EVEN MATTER!"

"You don't!" Blaise yelled back. "That's what '*she doesn't count*' means!"

His insult was followed by a piteous wail from the ghostly girl. "BWAAA! YOU'RE JUST AS BAD AS THAT OTHER ONE! INTRUDING IN MY TOILET! NO RESPECT FOR MY RIGHTS AS A FREE GHOST!" Then, Myrtle's head passed through the stall door as she glared hatefully at Blaise. "YOU'RE A ... A... A LIVINGIST!"

And with that, there was a loud splash as Moaning Myrtle fled into the sewers of Hogwarts.

"What the hell is a '*livingist*'?" Theo asked in confusion.

"It's someone who's bigoted against the dead," Luna answered casually. The others looked at her in confusion. "Well, *honestly*, a ghost accused Blaise of being one after he was rude to her. *What else* could it mean?"

"Okay, enough of all that," Harry finally said. "Let's get back to our experiment. I asked you three to be involved because the matter involves a certain Tom Marvolo Riddle." Ginny and Amy stiffened at that. "Yes, it ties back into the cursed diary from last year. And since you two already know a little about it *and* are people I trust, I thought you'd be ideal for this inquiry."

"I don't know anything about Tom Marvolo Riddle," Luna interjected. "Well, other than the fact that his plaque for *Special Services to the School* got taken down suddenly last year. Though I am pleased to know that I am someone you trust. Also, does anyone else smell Tabasco?"

Harry ignored that last question. "Well, I do trust you, Luna ... by Slytherin standards, at least. But more importantly, you three go *everywhere* together, and I assumed that if we



left you out, you'd just investigate why two of your closest friends keep disappearing into a toilet together with some regularity."

"So why isn't Astoria with us?" Ginny asked.

"Please," Amy scoffed. "The SlytherPuff? She's a sweetheart, but you know she can't keep a secret!"

"And *secrets* are what this experiment is about," said Harry in an authoritative voice that reminded Luna surprisingly of Gilderoy Lockhart in front of his research groups. "You see, the Diary, among its other properties, served as an artificial Secret Keeper for a modified Fidelius Charm. Jim and I know the Secret. In fact, after the Diary was destroyed, we both *became* the new Secret Keepers. But the Headmaster has asked me to spend some time probing the limits of this modified Fidelius, and I thought this might be a good approach."

He gestured towards Theo and Blaise. "Now, I, as Secret Keeper, have told the Secret to these two knuckleheads." Both boys waved cheerfully. "If *I* told either of you the Secret, you'd know it. Like, *really* know it. *But* if either of *them* told you the Secret, you would be incapable of retaining the information in your heads. So what we're going to do is this: Blaise and Theo are going to tell each of you facts that are related to the Secret but which are not an actual part of it. And then, we'll see what you remember that way."

"Facts?" Ginny said dubiously. "What sort of facts?"

"Well, for a start," Blaise began with a smirk. "Tom Marvolo Riddle was the son of a Muggle and a squib who was raised in the Muggle world. When he went to school here, he was considered a Muggleborn."

"And believe it or not," Theo continued. "The same is true for *You-Know-Who*!"

The three girls gasped.

"You-Know-Who was a Muggleborn?!" Amy exclaimed.

"You-Know-Who went to Hogwarts?!" Ginny exclaimed.

"You-Know-Who's middle name was *Marvolo*?!" Luna exclaimed. The other two girls looked at her funny, while Harry was shocked.

"*That's* what you take from that revelation?" Amy asked dubiously. Luna shrugged.

"Marvolo is an unusual name. So much so that it's odd for You-Know-Who to share it with anyone, let alone Tom Riddle who created the same Diary that Voldemort later turned into a Dark Object. I bet they had a common ancestor or something like that."

"Yeah, something like that," Theo muttered.

"I have to admit," said Harry, "it's kind of amazing that you can remember You-Know-Who's middle name, Luna."

"You-Know-Who has a middle name?" she responded excitedly. The other two girls looked equally surprised by the news.

"Oh that is so weird," Blaise said with a laugh.

"Yeah, that's the sort of the point of this experiment," said Harry. "Finding out what you *can* learn about the subject of a Fidelius without breaking it. Apparently, there's some wiggle room for names, but not for very long. What else do

you three remember about connections between Tom Riddle Jr. and You-Know-Who?"

"You can call him Voldemort, you know," Ginny snapped. "None of us are going to squeal and faint over it. And I remember that he's the Half-blood or maybe Muggleborn, he was son of a squib and a Muggle, and he went to Hogwarts at some point. The same was true for Riddle." Amy and Luna nodded in agreement.

"So names are out, but blood status is okay?" Blaise asked in confusion.

Harry shrugged. "The intent of the Fidelius was to obscure Voldemort's true identity. I guess magic doesn't consider his blood status to be that big of an identifier."

"Speaking of which," Amy interrupted. "I would think it a big deal if The Dark ... if *Voldemort* was a Muggleborn who was leading Purebloods to kill other Muggleborns. Why hasn't this been released to the public? I bet my Uncle Gregory would turn on Voldemort in a heartbeat if he knew the truth."

"Too risky for the other Muggleborns," Theo answered. "If the truth became common knowledge at a time when most of the free Death Eaters were Purebloods who claimed that Voldemort had them Imperiused, it would drive anti-Muggleborn bigotry even higher."

"Which is why we need to keep these experiments hush-hush. The last thing ... we ... want ...." Harry's voice trailed off as he started sniffing loudly.

"What is it?" Theo asked.

"My brain just caught up with my nose," Harry answered while scanning the room with his eyes, willing his Legilimency to increase his perception. "I smell Tabasco sauce too."

"Maybe someone had tacos for lunch," Blaise said with a smirk.

"It's Hogwarts. We don't have tacos for lunch here," Ginny said.

"Yeah, it's a pity," Harry muttered while looking around the room. "They were one of my favorites back in Muggle primary school."

"What's a taco?" asked Amy.

"Hard to explain without a discussion of New World indigenous cuisine," Blaise said cheerfully. "Think of them as beef pasties that have gone horribly wrong. Or horribly right, depending on your point of view."

"Harry," Luna asked while ignoring the culinary discussion. "Do you think the smell might have something to do with whatever's under the Notice Me Not Charm?"

Harry shook his head. "I haven't put one up yet."

"No, the one that was already up when you came in?"

Everyone turned to stare at the young Gryffindor.

"There's ... a Notice Me Not active in this room," Harry said slowly. "And you can see through it?"

"Of course not, silly," the girl answered with a laugh. "But I can see the way all your nargles spin counter-clockwise

when any of you get near it, and I know what *that* means. Anyway, it's somewhere over there."

She pointed towards the toilet stalls on the back-left side of the room. The boys stepped between the girls and that area (causing Amy and Ginny both to roll their eyes at their "chivalry") before simultaneously casting *Finite* in that direction. Instantly, there was a soft shimmer over one door. And just as instantly, everyone in the group could now hear a soft bubbling sound, and they could each now scent what had first smelled of Tabasco sauce but was now plainly a potion that they'd all encountered before. Harry stepped over to the door and cautiously opened it. Inside, someone had set up a small cauldron and burner on the floor. A thin reddish liquid filled the cauldron, and a Fifth Year Potions book lay on the floor nearby open to the page containing the recipe for Pepper-Up Potion.

"Who could be making contraband Pepper-Up Potions in the girls' toilet," Blaise asked in confusion.

It was at that moment that a flustered and frazzled-looking Hermione Granger burst into the room, only to stop and freeze in surprise at the tableau of six of her closest friends standing around one of her "side projects."

"Wow," she said nervously. "I guess you three were *really* desperate to use the toilet, huh!"

None of the others laughed.

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***27 January 1994***

Hogwarts

4:00 p.m.

"Shaved Caterpillars!" barked Rufus Scrimgeour with as much dignity as he could muster given the absurdity of the password he was forced to utter.

In response to the candy-themed password, the gargoyle in front of the entrance to the Headmaster's office moved aside, and the DADA professor ascended the staircase with Harry Potter following close behind. The boy had spent weeks in preparation for this meeting, including many hours of private sessions with both Snape and Scrimgeour. The focus of said study was to accelerate his Occlumency development to the point of establishing a true secondary personality that could withstand basic Legilimency scrutiny. It was a simple alteration, basically a perfect copy of Harry's own true self *except* that this version knew nothing about the Azkaban breakout, nothing about horcruxes (beyond what Rufus and Albus had revealed previously), and above all, nothing about Sirius Black's innocence.

But while it was a simple persona, such Occlumency was still considered a fifth-tier skill, and Harry was barely considered a 4th-level Occlumens. Still, it only needed to hold up for half-an-hour at most and stand against mere passive Legilimency. Unfortunately, Albus Dumbledore's passive Legilimency was *very good*.

In response to the Headmaster's voice, Rufus opened the door and entered Albus's office. Harry followed behind somewhat meekly while carrying a thick bundle of papers – the Sirius Black trial transcript.

"Rufus, Harry, good afternoon," said the Headmaster amiably. "I must admit to surprise at your request for a meeting, Rufus. Particularly a meeting called on behalf of a student who wished to interview me for a school project. You have not demonstrated such patronage of any other

students so far this year. And I can't remember the last time *any* of the Hogwarts faculty asked for a private meeting such as this one."

He smiled. "On the other hand, it *is* a diversion from endless paperwork, so I am happy to acquiesce." He turned to the boy who had taken a seat next to Scrimgeour in front of the man's desk. "So, Harry, what can I do for you?"

"Well, sir," Harry began somewhat nervously. "Professor Scrimgeour has assigned my class to do written and oral reports on various aspects of the last Wizarding War, and especially on topic of the Death Eaters. I chose to write about the trial of Sirius Black."

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose, and Harry suddenly looked bashful. "He was supposed to be my father's best friend, and his betrayal hurt my family terribly and ... well...."

"That betrayal also initiated the sequence of events that led to your placement with the Dursleys," Dumbledore finished gently. "I quite understand how this matter would be important to you. How can I help?"

"Well, Professor Scrimgeour helped me to obtain a copy of the transcript, but I noticed that at no point did any of the judges even bother to ask him *why* he turned. Were you involved in the case at the time?"

"No. I was on the Blind Panel – our name for the men and women trusted enough to oversee secret trials – but I did not serve on Black's trial nor play any role in it. Indeed, James and Lily privately advised me that he had been their Secret Keeper and had betrayed them, but I had no idea of the true depths of his perfidy until the newspapers ran a summary of the trial."

Harry blinked. "But you were Chief Warlock! Surely you'd have been kept in the loop on high-level trials like that."

"Well, Harry, first of all, I was *not* Chief Warlock in 1981. Edith MacMillan held that position at the time of Black's trial. I did not succeed her until a few years later. Second ... tell me, Harry, do you know what the Chief Warlock actually does?"

"Um, oversee Wizengamot sessions?"

"Only in the broadest sense. The position is similar to the Speaker in the Muggle House of Commons. Mainly, I recognize those who wish to speak, I rule motions and comments in or out of order, and I bang the gavel at the start and finish of each session. That's about it. Even the few substantive powers I do have are subject to immediate review upon objection by any seat holder, and my parliamentary rulings can be overturned by a simple majority. I don't even have a vote of my own except to break a tie. Also, upon accepting the position, I swore an oath to execute the office of Chief Warlock faithfully and fairly. While acting in my official capacity, I am literally incapable of demonstrating bias towards any faction even when I strenuously object to a proposed course of action that has majority support. And worse, even when ruling on a motion from some Lord who was most likely a former Death Eater. It is, at times, intensely frustrating."

Rufus snorted. "And also a waste of potential. If you would only step down as Chief Warlock and take the seat you are entitled to as an Order of Merlin holder, you would instantly become the nucleus of probably the most powerful faction in the government. And we both know you've turned down the Minister's job three times, and each time the job went to an increasingly less competent person."



Dumbledore frowned with distaste. "No, Rufus. I will not pursue influence in such a way. Full-time politics would require me to step down as Headmaster, and I love my role here at Hogwarts too much to sacrifice it for higher ambitions. More importantly, I have learned the hard way that I am not meant to hold the reins of political power."

"Not even for the Greater Good?" Rufus asked slyly.

The Headmaster's eyes twinkled. "*Especially* not for the Greater Good."

Harry looked back and forth between the two older men in confusion as he wondered at the subtext he was missing. "Um, so anyway, if you don't really know anything about the trial itself, I wondered if you might be able to put me in touch with the three judges who did oversee it, assuming they're still alive."

Dumbledore shook his head. "The identities of the Blind Panel are magically sealed as part of the Death Eater Laws, Harry, a piece of legislation backed by powerful magic. I cannot simply reveal them to a student for a school project, even if I wanted to."

"No, sir, but as Chief Warlock, I believe you *can* unlock the identity sigils on the transcript that identify those judges for your own benefit. Then, if you're willing to do so, you could owl them all letters to see if they might consent to revealing themselves as you did. Or failing that, to communicate with me through anonymous owl letters with you as a go-between."

Dumbledore thought about the request for a moment and then reached out his hand. The transcript floated from Harry's lap over to him. Then, he adjusted his spectacles, pulled out his wand, and tapped the sigils at the top of the

first page. Harry already knew that three sigils represented the judges while the fourth represented the clerk assigned to the trial who affirmed the accuracy of the transcript. Although Harry did not actually *remember* Scrimgeour's agenda at the moment due to his self-altered memories, the older Slytherin's plan was to obtain the names of the three judges and then investigate to see if any of them could have been coopted by Death Eaters. At Dumbledore's command, the sigils shimmered and melted to reform into four names. He studied the names for a moment and then his eyebrows rose in surprise.

"All three of the judges of the Black trial are known to me. All of them served with distinction and were all known for conducting themselves as judges with the highest, most impeccable standards. And all three were implacably opposed to Voldemort and the Death Eaters."

Harry nodded at that while Rufus narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"*And*," Dumbledore continued, "all three of them were *dead* at the time Sirius Black's trial was supposedly held."

"*WHAT?!*" Rufus bellowed.

"What I said," he continued. "All three died within the six-month period *before* the trial date. Two were killed by Death Eaters in separate incidents, and a third died naturally from a heart attack. Yet all three somehow affixed their judicial sigils to this transcript which was subsequently entered as the official court proceedings."

Harry was shocked. "How could that have happened, Professor?"

The older man closed his eyes and thought about the procedures that had been in place at the time. Then, his eyes opened excitedly.

"The fourth name on this paper is the clerk supposedly assigned to the trial. *His* name, which I *can* reveal, was Herbert Cattermole, and he was also the *Chief Clerk*. Which means that in addition to his duties with regard to the actual trials, he also held and maintained the judicial seals of all judges who died in office. As I recall, the idea was that after the War was over, all of the judges who died during their time of service would have their seals affixed to a memorial wall. Until then, the seals would be locked up in Cattermole's safe."

The fire in Rufus Scrimgeour's eyes was murderous. "Do you seriously mean to tell me, Albus Dumbledore, that all it would take to *fake* a Death Eater trial and conviction would be for a single Ministry functionary put in charge of seals that once belonged to deceased judges to simply affix them to *a forged transcript!*?"

The Headmaster leaned back in his chair in surprise. "That is a serious accusation. Not to mention a remarkable leap to make based solely on the irregularities that have just been revealed." His eyes narrowed. "Of course, you've ferreted out the truth with fewer clues, I suppose. Can I assume that you have some independent basis for doubting this transcript's validity even before you learned of its possible forgery."

"Nothing ... actionable, Albus," he grumbled. "And nothing I can share at this time."

"Then, all I can say to answer your question is ... yes, I imagine a corrupt Chief Clerk who had been suborned

could, theoretically, have used the seals of deceased judges to forge a trial record well enough to put an innocent person in Azkaban."

Dumbledore's face darkened in anger. "I'm sure you recall, Rufus, that I was strongly opposed to the passage of the Death Eater Laws as the time of their introduction *precisely because* they were pushed through too quickly and without sufficient deliberation to prevent abuse. This is not the first such abuse of those laws I have encountered. Though, if it truly resulted in the wrongful conviction of Sirius Black, it may well be the most egregious."

The former Auror gave a sour expression. "Yes, well, you know the First Rule of Political Cowardice, Albus: The People are demanding that we do something, and *this* is something. Therefore, we should do *this*, whatever it is. What happened to Herbert Cattermole?"

Dumbledore thought for a moment. "As I recall, he decided to retire not long after Voldemort's fall. Retire and emigrate to the Caribbean, I think. His son Reginald presently works in the Magical Maintenance Department at the Ministry in London. He might have more details."

*"Emigrated to the Caribbean?!"* Scrimgeour spat. "How ... *convenient*."

"Hang on," Harry interrupted. "What about my parents? I mean, even if the trial transcript is a fake, both my parents still say that he was their Secret Keeper and that he betrayed our whole family to You-Know-Who. What, were they both Memory Charmed or something?"

Scrimgeour shook his head. "No. They submitted magical affidavits. As part of that process, they would have been

required to handle Remembralls to ensure that their memories had not been tampered with. And there is no form of Memory Alteration spell that can hold up to a Remembrall, not even a memory-altering Imperius."

Harry frowned at that as a brief silence fell on the room. Then, with visible reluctance, Dumbledore spoke.

"That's ... not *entirely* accurate," he said. Scrimgeour's head snapped up as he fixed the Headmaster with a furious gaze. Harry just looked back and forth in confusion.

"Um ... *which part?*"

Dumbledore sighed loudly and then produced his wand with which he carved a complex pattern in the air. In response, all of the paintings in the office instantly froze.

"You told me once that you collect secrets, Rufus. Here's a corker to add to your collection. I am ... reliably informed that the Department of Mysteries has access to a potion which, if fed to someone immediately before they are subjected to memory alteration, will render such alterations undetectable by a Remembrall or any other similar means."

"Reliably ... informed," Rufus said slowly. "*How* reliably?"

Albus coughed in what might have been embarrassment. "I have personally witnessed its use."

Scrimgeour's mouth opened and closed as he grappled with this development. "We have used Remembralls to confirm the validity of testimony *since 1783!* Do you mean to tell me that there is a cloud over *every single criminal conviction for over two centuries?!*"

Dumbledore held up his hands placatingly. "No, no. Saul Croaker, the Voice of the Unspeakables, assured me that the potion's manufacture and use was regulated with the highest possible clearance. They use it to erase evidence of forbidden magic deemed Unspeakable, not for anything like witness tampering."

"Such naivete in a man of your age, Albus," Scrimgeour said while clucking his tongue. "Tell me - did *Rookwood* have access to the formula?"

"No," Dumbledore said firmly. "I asked Saul about that when Rookwood was revealed as a Death Eater. He assured me that Rookwood was never assigned to brew the potion. In fact, despite his brilliance in other areas of magic, Rookwood was not a Potions Master and lacked the skills needed to brew it even if he had access to the formula. Furthermore, any specific knowledge or memories he might have had of the potion's nature would have been locked away from his conscious mind by operation of his Unspeakable Oath upon his expulsion from the DOM."

"Uh-huh," Rufus said with a dubious expression. "Did he also *assure you* that Rookwood never had the opportunity to filch some vials and stockpile them for You-Know-Who's use?"

The Headmaster's grimace answered that question even before he spoke. "Saul was ... evasive on that point, though he did reassure me that all ... *non-traditional* potions used by Unspeakables were designed with special enchantments that would make them impossible to reverse engineer."

"Is there a way to break Memory Charms cast in conjunction with this potion?" Harry asked. "As incredible as it seems, my father may well have sent his best friend to

Azkaban for a crime he didn't commit! I would hope he'd want to do something about that."

Dumbledore nodded. "Let me consult with Saul Croaker. Undoubtedly, getting solid answers from him will be like pulling dragons' teeth, but I can be quite persistent. In the meantime, I ask you to keep this information to yourselves."

"Oh dear!" Rufus exclaimed with mock outrage. "And I was so looking forward to seeing a big blaring *Daily Prophet* headline announcing that '*Undetectable Memory Charms Destroy Basis of British Wizarding Justice.*' Come along, Potter. Let us adjourn to my office for a debriefing while the Headmaster grapples with a secretive cabal of professionally paranoid mad wizards."

On the way to the DADA classroom, Scrimgeour rebuffed every attempt by the boy to talk about what they'd learned. Once inside the classroom, the former Auror set up a truly spectacular number of privacy Charms before finally giving Harry permission to speak.

"Wow," Harry finally said almost breathlessly. "I still can't believe it! This whole time, Sirius Black, You-Know-Who's right hand man, has actually been ...."

"Salazar's scintillating synecdoche," Scrimgeour interrupted. Harry blinked repeatedly and shook his head in response.

"... innocent," he concluded. "You know, that may be the *creepiest* Occlumency experience I've had yet. Knowing something, and then choosing not to know it. And if you hadn't given me the pass phrase, I'd have never remembered the truth again until I relearned it naturally, would I?"

"Indeed. I suppose it would have been inconvenient for you if I'd keeled over dead of a heart attack or something on the way back to my classroom without terminating your secondary persona." He bent over and peered into the boy's eyes. "No obvious signs of any Occlumency mishaps. How does your brain feel? No sensations of an intruder sharing your mind? No lingering impulses to believe things you know are untrue?"

"None that I'm aware of," Harry answered. "I'll meditate back in the dorm and make sure I'm not thinking anything I don't mean to."

Then, he looked at Scrimgeour quizzically. "Professor Snape learned to do that trick so he could be a spy. But what made *you* learn to create alternate personalities?"

Scrimgeour barked out a laugh. "Potter, I am *literally embarrassed* on your behalf that you would ask such a blunt and provocative question and genuinely expect an answer."

Harry thought about it and nodded. "Fair enough. Now that I think about it, I'm embarrassed I asked it like that as well. So what happens next?"

"Next? We spend some time contemplating what we have learned before we plot our next course of action. Albus will make his own investigations, but the Unspeakables are involved now which vastly complicates matters, at least as far as clearing Sirius Black's name goes."

The boy nodded. "Any thoughts about Herbert Cattermole? It would be convenient if we had a fugitive Death Eater we could hang everything on."

"Impractical," Rufus said as he sat down and propped his feet up on his desk. "Even if we could pin the blame on



Cattermole, it doesn't solve the larger problem. If Cattermole simply faked the entire transcript, how do we prove it in a way that doesn't implicate roughly a third of the Wizengamot and possibly trigger a revival of the Wizarding War?"

Harry chuckled. "Maybe we could say some other Death Eater did everything Sirius was convicted of and this Cattermole bloke just whited out the name and put Sirius's down."

Rufus did not respond, and when Harry looked over, he realized that the ex-Auror was staring at him with a feverish expression.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Of *course*!" Rufus exclaimed as he jumped up out of his chair. "The transcript isn't faked! Cattermole simply switched out Black's name for the real traitor! But who ... ah, yes! Obviously, the real traitor was *Marcellus Frump*!"

Harry stared at Rufus in amazement and confusion. "Who the hell is Marcellus Frump?"

The older Slytherin turned to look at the boy with a sly grin. "I have no idea, Potter. I haven't finished inventing him yet."

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*31 January 1994*

Tirana, Albania

A posh Muggle hotel room

Yetta Garshi sat uncomfortably in the overstuffed chair with one hand resting on her belly. To be fair, the witch did most things uncomfortably. It was the standard condition for any female who was four months pregnant. As Yetta waited for

the meeting to begin, she thought about the circumstances that had brought her here and tried not to weep. She'd met Oleg Kryzenko at Durmstrang, and he'd proposed the previous Spring. They'd both sat their NEWTs together and made plans to get married at Christmas. Then, Oleg had gone on holiday with some of his drinking buddies. After too much firewhiskey, they decided they might enjoy a good time at the Veela preserve in Bulgaria, letting their carnal urges overpower their knowledge about what exactly wild Veela really were.

*"At least he died with a smile on his face,"* she thought to herself bitterly. It was a week after the funeral that she'd found out he'd also apparently miscast the Contraceptive Charm the last time they'd had sex. *"That's what I get for trusting my boyfriend. Even if he was better at Charms, I still should have cast it myself."*

The loss of Yetta's fiancé was a tragedy as far as her family was concerned. The fact that she'd gotten pregnant out of wedlock, on the other hand, was a *scandal*. While at Durmstrang, Yetta had been a bit of a prude, which was common for the comparatively insular wizards and witches of the Balkan peninsula, and she'd often looked down her nose at the girls who came to the Institute from the more *cosmopolitan* regions of Europe. The way they dressed! And acted! It was a shock to see such narrowmindedness turned back on her by her own family due to an unplanned pregnancy, and it was made abundantly clear to her that if she ever wanted the support and affection of her parents again, *she would not keep this child*.

Nor was terminating the pregnancy an option. After all, given her blood and that of Olaf, her child was likely to be magical. Albanian governmental policy and Balkan cultural

mores both militated heavily against abortion for witches. If the child was born a squib, of course, such squeamishness fell by the wayside. In this somewhat backward part of the Wizarding World, it was still perfectly legal to kill children who had not shown magic by the age of eleven. And so Yetta decided that if she was going to have this baby and give it away, it would be to Western parents, whether British, German, or French, who would promise to love it even if it had no magic. Then, Yetta would go move on without looking back or feeling any guilt.

Happily, after she'd reached out to some of her father's less-than-reputable contacts, she made contact with the Greys, a British couple who were young and wealthy but unable to have children of their own. She'd first gotten the news from the lawyer handling the adoption, some British solicitor who'd sent an owl all the way from London weeks earlier. And today, in this hotel suite, she would be meeting the future parents of her child (her *son*, she'd recently learned from a diagnostic spell) for the first time. Yetta was already bracing herself to give her baby boy away, but still, she at least wanted to be sure that his future mummy and daddy were kind and loving people.

The door opened and the Greys entered. The man was quite handsome and the woman a stunning blonde though she looked noticeably older than her husband (not that Yetta was in a position to criticize such couplings). Yetta struggled to rise from the chair, but Madam Grey rushed forward to stop her.

"Oh, don't get up my dear! You must conserve your strength! We want your baby to be as strong and healthy as possible, Miss Garshi."

The pregnant witch leaned back in the chair as Mr. Grey poured her a cup of tea from a service that had been provided for this meeting.

"Please," she said in halting English. "Please to call me ... Yetta."

"Of course, dear," said the blonde woman. "And you must call me Cissy. And my husband, Barty."

"Quite so, quite so," said the man who called himself Barty Grey with a brilliant smile that he'd spent an hour practicing in the mirror before this meeting. Over the years of his submersion, he'd completely forgotten how to smile in a way that was inviting rather than terrifying.

"I know you've been through some terrible stresses," he said gently, "but Cissy and I will look after you. Until it's time for the birth, you will want for nothing and be treated like a queen. And afterwards, well ... we will see to it that you are suitably rewarded for giving us this blessing."

Yetta smiled but then looked pensive. "And you promise? Whether baby is magical or squib, you will love?"

"Of course, my poppet," said the woman who called herself Cissy Grey. "So long as he's born healthy, we truly don't care if the baby is born with magic or not."

She reached over and patted the young pregnant witch on the knee. "I promise you. To Barty and myself, the child you carry will be *the most important child in the world*."

Barty nodded. "Oh yes. And I know that child will grow up to be forever grateful for, well, the *sacrifice* you will be making for him."

Yetta relaxed and smiled in relief. It pleased her to know that the couple was so kind and loving and would provide a good home for her son. Narcissa and Barty "Grey" smiled back at her beatifically, the perfect picture of connubial bliss.

After that day, none of Yetta Garshi's family or friends would ever see or hear from her again.

## Chapter End Notes

NEXT: Someone stages an intervention for Hermione. And then another one for Jim. Lucius makes a horrifying discovery. And Rita gets a big scoop.

AN 1: Special thanks to the POS-Editorial crew from the Sinister Man's Discord server: akitcougar, astolfo, crafty\_kat, darkphoenix31, HeidiWolf, IPoke, Miss Andrist, Mr. Gift, Pokeflute, slytherin's daughter, Stelle, vaibhavi, and Vin5.

AN 2: What the Sinister Man is reading: "Circumstance" by WinchesterNimrod (in which an increasingly distraught Cedric Diggory suffers a Groundhog Day effect on the day of the Third Challenge) and "Retired Prometheus" by Vipavo (which features an intriguing and compelling Voldemort who responded to the events of Halloween 1981 by saying "screw this, I'm done." A warning for those who feel they need it - the latter fic contains several prominent gay relationships. No slash (so far), but some people apparently feel they need to know that going into a story for reasons that elude me.)

AN 3: Casting changes - While I have nothing but respect for Bill Nighy, he's totally wrong for POS-Rufus. Not nearly irascible enough. And so, the part of Rufus

Scrimgeour will henceforth be played by Richard Wilson (Victor Meldrew from "One Foot In The Grave") wearing Bill Nighy's wig from Deathly Hallows. The part Barty Crouch Jr. will still be played by young David Tennant, but the part of Narcissa Black will henceforth be played Charlize Theron. Because it's fanfic, and so I can cast anyone I want.

AN 3: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P\*\*\*\*\*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN 4: You might not believe it from the distressingly slow pace of updates, but I think I can see the end of Death Eater Menace, probably within approximately 10 more chapters.

# Secrets Revealed

## Chapter Notes

### SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and no thinly disguised allegories about tolerance. Oh, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### ***Harry Potter and the Death Eater Menace***

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***Harry Potter and all associate characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.***

### ***CHAPTER 34: Secrets Exposed***

***2 February 1994  
From the Daily Prophet***

## ***THE DEATH EATER MENACE! ARE MUGGLEBORNS SECRETLY TO BLAME?***

### ***An Investigative Expose by Rita Skeeter***

Regulus furrowed his brow at the lurid headline, and his grimace only deepened as he read the rest of the article. It had been the conspiracy's plan to make the Aurors believe that a group of Muggleborns with access to shapeshifting magic had been behind the Azkaban breakout.

A *small* group most likely motivated by revenge for past harm suffered at the hands of Death Eaters during the last war. It was *not* meant to be a massive conspiracy whose goal was to seize the magical and material assets of Voldemort's former organization as part of some vendetta against all Purebloods. Yet that was the slant of Skeeter's story: that the daring jailbreak was part of a plan by American Muggleborn metamorphmagi – and wasn't *that* a mouthful! – to undermine Wizarding Britain's defenses for some inscrutable reason.

Well, it was *officially* inscrutable because the article never came out with direct accusations, but the *subtext* was quite plain. The article spent much of its length rehashing old news and conspiracy theories about the Muggleborn Rights movement that had briefly flourished in Britain prior to Voldemort's rise. A movement that quite a few Purebloods thought *led* to Voldemort's rise, in fact.

Then, Regulus grimaced again as his plane experienced some turbulence. He'd drawn the short straw in this endeavor, as he was the only conspirator who'd ever been on a plane before. ("*Once! In 1987!*" he'd protested.) Alas, it had been decided that someone *really* needed to investigate the disappearance of Herbert Cattermole if they were going to clear Sirius of his crimes. Cattermole's trail led to the



Bahamas more than a decade earlier and then went cold. And since a Portkey to anywhere in North America would be heavily scrutinized in the current political climate, that meant taking a Transatlantic jet for the journey.

The wizard sighed and put away his newspaper and reclined his chair to try for some sleep. He'd charmed the moving pictures in the *Prophet* to be still, but the headlines were still potentially visible to Muggles, and he had no wish to risk a breach of the Statute of Secrecy. He'd be breaking quite enough laws on this trip as it was.

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## ***Hogwarts***

### ***Later that same day...***

Naturally, Skeeter's "investigative report" caused quite a stir among the student body. Things weren't improved by a subsequent interview given by James Potter over the Wizarding Wireless in which he condemned Skeeter's "flights of fancy" but was nevertheless unwilling to conclusively deny that her theories could be true.

The article and the Ministry's response to it dominated the discussion at that afternoon's meeting of the Hogwarts Cultural Preservation Society. Daphne Greengrass gave a report to the group on the final days of the Nobby Leach administration and the extremist Muggleborn elements that emerged after the death of the first (and only) Muggleborn Minister for Magic and the expulsion of his patron, Alexander McAvity, from Britain. In particular, Daphne spoke about McAvity's three chief lieutenants, Martha Bracewell, Timothy Spraggins, and Rian O'Grady, all three of whom were Muggleborn activists who turned to violence and revolution in his forced absence. Bracewell accidentally killed herself in a quixotic attempt to blow up the Marriage

Contract Registry Office because she was opposed to arranged marriages. Spraggins was cornered while trying to sabotage the Hogwarts Express in some manner and killed himself rather than be taken alive and made to betray his fellow terrorists. Most shocking, though, was the tale of Rian O'Grady who simply disappeared after his public assassination of Cantankerous Nott, author of *The Sacred 28* and father of the current Lord Nott. And whatever feelings anyone had towards House Nott, most of those present were incensed at the thought of such a revered Pureblood historian dying at the hands of an Irish revolutionary Muggleborn who'd never even attended Hogwarts.

As they listened to Greengrass's speech and the fierce arguments it engendered, Ginny and Amy nodded along at the appropriate moments. But inwardly, they were growing concerned at the number of students who increasingly found it acceptable to mutter openly about "*filthy Mudbloods*." And they were even more concerned that neither Diggory nor Neville nor any of the other "good Purebloods" felt inclined to speak out against the slurs.

The next day, posters for upcoming SPAM meetings were found defaced in the halls.

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## ***9 February 1994***

By this point, Harry didn't need to be a secret Legilimens to know that something was seriously wrong in his relationship with Jim. His brother wasn't openly hostile as he'd been throughout most of their first two years, but the Boy-Who-Lived was visibly tense and closed off whenever they were together. Even Remus had remarked on it during their few sessions since the new year began. Jim had denied

it, of course, but he'd also revealed that a recent "schedule change" in the Gryffindor practice schedule meant that he couldn't continue to practice Wu Xi Do at their normal time. Remus, who apparently never slept it seemed, readily agreed to meet at 5 a.m. instead, a prospect that horrified Harry. As he agreed to separate lessons in the afternoon for Theo and himself while Jim and a reluctant Ron met before dawn, Harry's hurt feelings over the lengths Jim would endure to avoid him warred with a degree of pride in how Jim had figured out the best way to avoid him – by threatening to make him get up earlier in the morning.

To Harry's great surprise, the answer came from *Ron Weasley* who pulled Harry aside after DADA one afternoon with Hermione at his side. They agreed that Jim was acting strangely but promised to handle it ... *the Gryffindor way*. Harry had no idea what that meant, and so Hermione explained the concept of *an intervention*. Harry privately agreed that having a group of friends corral Jim into a room to force him to talk about his *feelings* was the most crudely blunt approach he could think of and so was indeed The Gryffindor Way.

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### ***Later that afternoon ...***

When Jim entered the study room to meet with Ron for their weekly tutoring session with Hermione, he was surprised to find that Neville and Luna were also present.

"Come in, Jim," Hermione said with authority. "We need to talk."

"Uh-oh," he said. The witch's tone reminded him uncannily of his mother's whenever he'd been in trouble growing up. "What did I do?"

"That's what we're here to find out, mate," Ron said. "This is an interjection."

"Intervention," Hermione corrected.

Ron shrugged. "Whatever. Anyway, we're here because you've been acting funny towards Harry ever since we came back to school. And since we've got a sort of informal policy of *doing something* now whenever a fellow Gryff is acting funny, well, here we are."

"I'm not ... possessed!" Jim said hotly. "Did Harry put you up to this?" he added in accusation.

"Actually, Jim," Neville said. "We've all noticed it. And we decided to talk with you even without discussing it with Harry beforehand."

Hermione nodded along. In fact, Harry *had* asked her to keep an eye on Jim weeks earlier, but she felt it unwise to reveal that in light of the boy's evident paranoia.

"Well, there's nothing to talk about!" Jim snapped. "And I'm not *acting funny*. It's just ... I mean, Harry's my brother, but he's ... he's still a Slytherin, right? So, I should just be ... cautious around him."

As the boy spoke, Luna Lovegood said nothing. She simply stared at him intently. Or more accurately, the space surrounding his head. Hermione noticed the girl's attentiveness and then turned back to Jim.

"HARRY POTTER IS OUT TO GET YOU!" she shouted urgently and loud enough to make Jim twitch. Then, she turned back to Luna. "Well?"

Luna stared back at her in surprise and mild offense. "I thought I wasn't supposed to do things like that. That it was unethical when I did that to Neville on the train last September when he was afflicted by purple metal fury-flies and was acting all surly and disagreeable."

"And here I thought they were indigo," Neville muttered sarcastically. Hermione ignored him.

"Yes, yes," she said with a diffident wave of her hand. "But this is different. Or if it's not, just accept my hypocrisy and move on. Now what do you see?"

Luna scrunched up her face at that before looking back to a confused Jim. "Well, the nargles *are* acting funny. They're mostly ... maroon. Or fuschia maybe. The fury-flies are okay, and the wrackspurts are normal. I would say it's not really anger or fear driving him but somewhere in between. Like a deep suspicion for reasons he can't explain." She tilted her head.

"But the flight pattern is ... weird," she added.

Ron chuckled. "I can't begin to describe how troubling it is to hear Luna Lovegood call something *weird*."

"Is it like the nargles that you see around Neville and everyone else affected by the Ultimate Sanction?" Hermione inquired.

"I'm right here, by the way," Neville said irritably, but the two girls ignored him. After a few more seconds of study, Luna shook her head.

"No. Well, not *quite* anyway. I mean it's similar in that it's something external affecting his emotions. But the pattern

itself is different. To be honest, I don't think I've ever seen this particular flight pattern before."

"What are you people talking about?!" Jim sputtered angrily.

"Mate," Ron said, "come on. I'm sorry to be the one to say it. But I think you've been spelled against Harry somehow."

"Oh come on!" he spat. "If someone had put a hex on me to make me distrust my own brother, don't you think I'd remember it?"

At that remark, Neville and Hermione looked at one another sharply.

"Neville...?"

"On it!"

Instantly, Neville had his book bag open, and touched his wand to a hidden side compartment. Then, he reached inside and pulled out the Remembrall he'd been carrying since his First Year. He handed it over towards Jim who looked at it in distrust before sighing loudly and reaching out to take it. To his surprise, the Remembrall instantly lit up with a vibrant *purple* light. Hermione gasped in shock and shot up out of her chair in surprise.

Jim blinked, nonplussed at her reaction. "So ... that bad, huh?"

"Hermione, what is it?" Neville asked cautiously, concerned by Hermione's reaction. "What does a purple Remembrall mean? I've never seen it do that before."

Hermione swallowed. "We, um, studied this last year in Project Recall. How a Remembrall reacts to different Memory Charms was the first thing we learned. Dark red means an Obliviation. Blue means a voluntary Memory Lock." She looked up at Jim with an unnerving concern. "Purple means you were commanded to forget something *while under the Imperius Curse!*"

At that, everyone gaped, and Jim's eyes widened in horror. "Someone ... Imperius'd me? Who? And when?" Then, his expression darkened. "Could it have been Harry? Is that why I feel so ... distrustful towards him? Maybe I saw him doing something he shouldn't have at Potter Manor and he used the spell to make me forget it but I remember it subconsciously."

Hermione shook her head. "I find it difficult to believe that Harry, as gifted as he is, can cast the Imperius Curse at 13."

"Besides, Jim," added Luna. "Your nargles may not reflect any changes to your memories, but they clearly act unnaturally due to some external force that makes you distrust Harry whenever you're forced to think about him. I think that was a deliberate part of the curse - both to make you turn against Harry and not know why."

Jim frowned. "Who would go to those lengths to turn me against Harry?"

Ron snapped his fingers. "Hang on! That solicitor bloke who was at your house over the Christmas hols! Podmore, I think his name was. If Harry really does reconcile with the Potter family, isn't he out of a job?"

Neville shook his head. "I've met Artemus Podmore several times. He seems like a fine fellow and is very conscientious in his work for Harry. I don't think he'd resort to an

Unforgiveable against you while visiting your home no matter how much money is at stake."

"In any case, you're all forgetting something," Hermione said. "As far as you know, this all started on January 1st, right? Well, that was the day after the Potter New Year's Eve Ball. There must have been over 200 people in your house that night. It could have been any of them who cursed you."

"But why?" Jim asked while rubbing his head in frustration. Hermione shrugged.

"Perhaps you overheard something you weren't meant to hear. Or saw someone doing something they shouldn't have been doing."

"Look," Ron said while putting a reassuring hand on Jim's shoulder. "The first step in finding out who did this is to undo it. So how do we break someone out of the Imperius Curse?"

Everyone looked to Hermione, expecting her to have the answers as usual.

"Sorry, but for once I've no idea. We don't cover Unforgiveables until next year. And I know that, unlike conventional memory charms, a Remembrall can't restore memories you've been Imperius'd to forget. But right now, I think we need to let a teacher know about this. This was a very serious crime committed against you, Jim, and whoever is responsible will be facing a lifetime in Azkaban if they can be caught and convicted. We need to tell McGonagall, if not the Headmaster, at once. And your parents, of course. And I suppose probably the DMLE."



Jim nodded slowly. "I'll go tell my Mum right now. She can Floo call Dad, and then we can all go see Dumbledore together, I suppose." Then, he looked up at his friends. "Listen, can you guys ... would you please not tell Harry about this? At least, not until I've told Mum and Dad, and we've figured out what to do next?"

The others agreed to his request, and Jim left Gryffindor Tower despondently in search of his mother.

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### ***Gryffindor Tower***

***8:00 p.m.***

It was not until several hours later that an emotionally drained Jim returned to his dormitory where his friends were waiting on him. After adjourning to a study room (and setting up several privacy wards), the Boy-Who-Lived relayed the news.

"You were right. Apparently, it's nearly impossible to tell if someone is still under the Imperius Curse if it was cast properly. That's why the Imperius Defense worked for so many accused Death Eaters. But whoever used it on me was in a hurry, unpracticed with the spell, or both. Professor Dumbledore says he can spot enough signs of the Imperius with a Legilimency scan. I'm not *currently* under it, but the effects are now ingrained in me for the foreseeable future."

"That's awful!" Ron exclaimed. "Surely there's some way to break it!"

Jim shook his head. "If your will is strong enough or if you've been trained to resist the Imperius, you can throw off the control while it's happening or later while you're actively under the dark wizard's control – though

apparently, that's very hard. But if it's only one or two specific and limited commands – like '*distrust Harry*' or '*forget you saw me*' – then you can't throw it off at all by yourself. You need outside intervention by high-level Legilimency. Dumbledore says that while both he and Snape are strong Legilimens, neither of them has any skill at ... well, *psychic surgery* is what he called it, which sounds horrible and painful and is apparently kind of dangerous. So, it's been decided that for right now, we're just going to ignore all this and hope there aren't any other commands too deep for the Headmaster to detect. At Easter Break, I'll go back to Shamballa for a few days and let Healer Baskar take a look at me to see if he can fix me."

He sighed. "Well, that's what Mum wants to do. Dad seems really worried about me going back to Shamballa right now with everything else that's going on. I reckon they're in her rooms right now arguing about it."

"Do they have any idea who's responsible?" Hermione asked. "Or anyway to find out?"

"No," Jim replied with a crack in his voice. "And you were right, Hermione. It *could* have been anyone from the Ball. For that matter, it could have been anyone from the Ball *who'd been Imperius'd themselves by someone else and then commanded to curse me!* And if this psychic surgery thing doesn't work, the only way I'll ever be free of it is if the person who originally cast the curse *dies*."

"But surely the DMLE can do something!" Neville exclaimed.

"Dad doesn't want them involved yet. He's afraid that with the current climate, if it gets out that someone cursed me like that, it could cause a panic." He chuckled wryly. "That's

another thing he and Mum are probably arguing about. But he's got a point. If it got out that I thought Harry was behind this ... I mean, Rita Skeeter is already out to get him for some reason, and he was raised Muggleborn. You can imagine how people might take it if he were implicated in all this. Even though ...."

He paused and blinked rapidly before wiping his eyes with his sleeve.

"Jim?" Ron said gently. "Mate, what is it?"

"I actually accused Harry of being responsible in front of my parents and the Headmaster! Can you believe it? I couldn't resist thinking that way. Dumbledore reassured me that there's no way it could have been Harry but ...." He wiped his eyes again. "I *remember* how I felt before. How happy I was that Harry was coming home to us and that we were going to be real brothers. And now ... I can't stop being worried about what will happen if he does. I can't stop feeling that Harry's ... up to something. Something terrible that has to be stopped. That he's a danger to everyone I care about. And I know it's not *real* but still I... I...."

He paused, overcome with emotion. Suddenly, Luna rushed forward and pulled him into a tight hug.

"Jim, have I ever told you about the Kynoccephalos I saw with my father in Greece?" she began in a high, sing-songy voice. "They're huge, almost as large as Hagrid, and their heads look like those of dogs."

Ron, Hermione, and Neville stared at the girl in confusion over her strange non-sequitur. But then, something in her voice seemed to break through Jim's despair. He relaxed and gently returned the girl's hug.

"No, Luna. Why don't you tell me about them now? I could do with a good story."

She smiled at him and began her tale.

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***Meanwhile in the rooms of the Muggle Studies Professor***

Lily strode into her chambers with a cross expression on her face and an anxious husband on her heels. As soon as they were both inside, she sealed the door with a wave of her wand that simultaneously activated all the privacy wards she'd installed on her quarters.

"I still don't understand why you don't want to involve the DMLE, James," she said angrily. "If someone has used an Unforgiveable against *our son*, surely getting the Aurors involved is the next step. I mean, you *do* run the Auror Corps, do you not?"

"You know perfectly well that I do, Lily," he responded in a placating tone. "But I ... just think it's in Jim's best interest that we keep this in-house for right now."

She crooked an eyebrow at him. "And what about Harry's best interest, since whoever cursed Jim seems to have done so with the goal of turning them against one another."

James grimaced. "You don't know that," he said with a nervous urgency. "I mean, for all we know, maybe that's just a side-effect of whatever happened."

Lily nodded slowly at that and then moved over to the window that looked out over the Forbidden Forest. It was a new moon, but she could still see the swarm of Dementors that hovered over the forest even by starlight. She shivered

slightly, wondering which of the floating nightmares was the one who'd attacked Jim during last November's Quidditch match. She was still looking out the window with her back to James when she spoke again but more calmly. Or so it might seem.

"So... what do you think of Jim's claim that *Harry* might have been the one to cast the Imperius against him? Do you think he's capable of that?"

James hesitated and then spoke slowly, aware that he was tiptoeing through a verbal minefield.

"I ... certainly don't want to even think that. I mean, like Albus said, Harry's only a Third Year. Then again, I know you don't want to imagine it. And of course, I don't either. But we have to face facts, I guess. I mean, he *is* a Slytherin...."

Before he could say anything else, Lily whirled around in a flash with her wand pointed straight at him.

"***EXPPELLIARMUS!***" she cried. And James had just enough time to register that the green of his wife's eyes matched the Killing Curse before his wand was ripped from its holster to fly into her waiting hand.

"Lily! What do you think you're ...?!"

"SHUT UP! JUST SHUT UP AND STOP LYING TO ME, *YOU BASTARD!*"

James froze. While his wife was clearly in a fury, he noticed her anger had no effect on how steadily she had her wand pointed at him. And he was suddenly put in mind of some of the more vicious curses he'd seen her wield against Death Eaters back in the day.

"You've certainly proven you can keep secrets from me, James," she continued bitterly. "But only through silence. You have *never* been able to outright lie to me! I *know* you were the one who placed the Imperius on Jim! The only reason *Albus* doesn't know it too is that he's too good a person to think the worst of you. Oh, and because I encouraged Jim's theory that it was a guest at the Ball, I suppose. *But I know the timeline!* Jim and Harry were *fine* together after the Ball. They were *fine* together at lunch the next day. Jim wasn't cursed until *after* Harry, Artemus, and Peter had left the Manor. It could only have been one of us. And of the two of us, I'm not the one obsessed with the *insane idea* that Harry is going to trigger the Wizarding Apocalypse!"

"HARRY IS GOING TO BECOME THE PRINCE OF SLYTHERIN!" James suddenly shouted in a panic. "It's ... it's not a metaphor or anything! There is a *literal actual title* among the Snakes called '*The Prince of Slytherin.*' Jim told me about it."

"Before or after you *cursed him?*" she spat.

James looked away in shame and then related to Lily what had happened on the Quafflebash Court and what he'd learned about the conversation between Harry and Voldemort.

"You see, Lily-Flower? I'm ashamed, terribly ashamed of what I did. More ashamed than I've ever been in my life! But none of that matters in the face of what we now know about the Prophecy. Please, honey. Just give me back my wand and let's talk about this. I promise I won't use it against you."

He held out his hand to her, but her own wand hand didn't waver at all. Instead, she tightened her grip on both wands in case he tried wandless summoning.

"I know you won't use your magic against me, James. You couldn't even if you wanted to. But I'm holding onto your wand so you can't defend against me should I decide to stun you before calling Albus and then the Aurors. Or should I decide instead to hex you with something worse than Azkaban since I am not constrained the way you are."

He blinked at that. "What are you talking about?"

Lily laughed. "Really?! Fifteen years since our wedding day, and you *still* haven't bothered to *read* that marriage contract your mother had you sign?!"

Then she turned serious once more. Deadly serious.

"I don't *care* about your Prophecy, James! I don't *care* about your Greater Good. All I care about is protecting my two boys. I know Fate is a cruel bitch, and that someday, I might have to choose between them again. I don't know what I'll do on that day, James Potter. But until then, so long as I have the option of protecting them both, *I will do whatever it takes to do so*. And I warned you once before what would happen if I ever judged you a danger to either of them."

James lifted his chin defiantly. "So what happens now? Are you going to expose me and send your husband to Azkaban?"

She glared at him as if considering the issue before slowly lowering her wand.

"No, James, I won't, for three reasons. First, with the evidence I have, I don't think you'd be convicted. It's been

far too long to detect the Imperius with Priori Incantatem even for Albus. Outside of that, the evidence is mostly my word against yours, and I know how the word of the Lord of an Ancient and Noble House who is also Chief Auror would stack up against his uppity, gold-digging Mudblood wife. Tiberius Nott was able to escape prosecution despite much more evidence and much less renown. I have no doubt you'd *slither* out of justice."

James winced at the comparison to one of the "slimy snakes" he'd railed against for years.

"The second reason," she continued ruefully, "is that even if I could get you convicted with the sentence you deserved, it would be bad for both boys. With Lord Potter disgraced and in Azkaban, in this political climate, I have no guarantee that the Ministry would allow his *uppity, gold-digging Mudblood wife*" – she practically spat the words, each of which made James flinch – "to keep custody over either the Boy-Who-Lived or the Potter Heir. I can only assume the worst about which former Death Eater would be appointed their guardian in my place."

"Peter would never let that happen to you," James said confidently. Lily simply stared at him before continuing as if he'd not spoken.

"But the *third reason*, James, is that I won't take away Jim and Harry's father from them so long as I have power to ensure that you will *never* harm them again."

She tossed James's wand back to him almost casually. Then, she raised her own until it was pointed straight up.

"Heed my words, James Charlus Potter," she intoned with a strange solemnity. "Know that I, Lily Evans Potter, your wife and consort, and pursuant to our Contract of Marriage, do



hereby deem your actions towards our children to be in breach of your marital vows. Pursuant to Clause 19 of said Contract, I now inform you that any further harm inflicted by you upon either of them, whether physically, mentally, socially, financially, or magically, shall be judged by the Magic of the Contract. And if Magic finds you in violation, may you experience the full brunt of all contractual penalties. ***SO MOTE IT BE.***"

In response to her final words, the tip of her wand lit up briefly with a furious red light. James simply stared at her in utter confusion.

"What does all that mean?!" he asked.

Lily flicked her wand, and the door to her chambers unlocked and opened.

"It means you should probably go home and *read* the damned Marriage Contract before you do something else stupid that ruins you completely." She nodded towards the door. "Get out. And don't expect me at the Manor for Easter. Or the summer. Or possibly ever."

James stood and peered deeply into the eyes of the only woman he'd ever loved as if searching for the tiniest shred of pity or compassion. Then, he hung his head in sadness and left the room. Once he was past the threshold, Lily flicked her wand again, and the door slammed shut and locked.

Only then, did she allow herself to break down and cry.

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***Later that night in Jim's dorm room...***

It was well after midnight, but Jim still couldn't sleep. Unable to relax after the events of the day, he finally gave up, crawled out of bed, and crept as quietly as he could out and down to the Common Room with his book bag in tow. Once downstairs, he pulled out his prized Invisibility Cloak and set it to one side. He'd need it for a quick post-curfew trip to the Owlery, but first, he had a letter to write to the one person whose opinions mattered to him the most.

*Dear Uncle Pete,*

*I don't know how much Dad has told you, but something has happened. Something terrible I can't talk about in a letter. When can you come to Hogwarts?*

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## **10 February 1994**

The Island of St. Cyprian  
(technically in the British Virgin Islands)  
Office of the Chief Auror

"So tell me, Aura' Proudfoot!" snarled Chief Auror Marcelline Dupont of the St. Cyprian's DMLE in a heavy patois. "Why does a pasty British redcoat want to be comin' to owah liddle island without so much as a lettah of introduction! Like you Brits think you still own da place or somthin'!"

"*Junior Auror Michael Proudfoot*" pulled at the collar of his uniform coat as the witch regarded him balefully. For a moment, the intensity of her gaze reminded him of Rufus Scrimgeour's glare, despite the obvious differences between an elderly white Brit often described as "leonine" and the middle-aged black woman in dreadlocks. Not even the woman's attire - a short-sleeve white coat festooned

with medals and what appeared to be a pith helmet – undermined the severity of her expression.

Right up until she smiled broadly and laughed at his discomfort.

"Ah'm just playin', Aura' Proudfoot! Ah sweah, you shoulda seen da look on your face!" She laughed some more and shook her head. "But seriously, what can I do for you Aura'?"

"*Proudfoot*" relaxed. The woman accepted his performance after all and would not be using some obscure magic he'd never heard from to see through his disguise. Regulus had arrived two days before at Nassau International Airport. It had then taken him that long to find someone magical who could ferry him by boat from the Bahamas to the "lost island" of St. Cyprian, which was otherwise protected by anti-Apparition and anti-Portkey wards against interlopers who had not already been granted permission to travel there. St. Cyprian (population: 420) was located roughly 300 miles due east of the Bahamas in the heart of what the Muggles called "the Bermuda Triangle." A silly superstition, even by Muggle standards – there had been a few mysterious incidents over the decades, mainly the result of Muggle aircraft interacting poorly with St. Cyprian's web of Muggle-Repelling and Notice-Me-Not Charms, but those problems were soon resolved and the island paradise returned to its usual placidity ... and to its status as one of the world's best places for expatriate wizards fleeing their home governments. Notably, it was *not* a signatory to the ICW's Special Treaty on International Extradition.

"I'm actually here looking into a cold case," he said easily while perfectly imitating the real Proudfoot's voice. "One that heated up after the Azkaban breakout."

Dupont stiffened. "Do ya t'ink some of those escaped Death Eatahs might have come ta St. Cyprian?" she said with alarm. Reg raised his hands to reassure her.

"We have no reason at all to think that, Chief Auror. But in the course of pursuing all leads, we discovered some ... irregularities in the trial of one of the escapees. I drew the short straw and got sent here to interview the man who was court scribe at the time. His name is Herbert Cattermole."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Cattermole? I t'ink ya come all this way for nothing, then. He's been dead for ovah twelve years."

Reg blinked in surprise. "Dead, you say. Well, since you remember him so clearly after all this time, I take it his death was under suspicious circumstances?"

"Ya could say dat. Ah remember the case quite clearly. Most of the auras from dat period do. Ah wouldn't necessarily say St. Cyprian's a peaceful, crime-free place. We gots our bar room brawls and our jealous husbands and wives and all the usual tings dat can lead ta killings. But in de last fifty years, we've only seen one person dead o' da Killin' Curse. It's understandable that Cattermole's death made quite an impression."

He whistled. "The Avada Kedavra! Yes, I can see how that would be something memorable. What else can you tell me about the case?"

"Ah can do moar dan tell ya. Ah'll be happy ta give ya da case file. What dere is of it, anyway."

Dupont waved her wand, and after a few seconds, an old manila envelope flew into the room with the name Herbert Cattermole on it, along with the date: 20 November 1981.

Reg fought to conceal his interest. That was just days after Sirius's fictitious trial date. He thanked Chief Auror Dupont warmly for her assistance, and after some idle chit-chat about the history of the island and some sights he should check out while here, Regulus left and returned to his hotel room where he reviewed the file on the murder of Herbert Cattermole.

According to the sparse report, Cattermole had arrived on St. Cyprian on the 13th of November in 1981, when he rented out the Honeymoon Suite in one of the island's swankiest resort hotels. He'd also dropped several hundred galleons at the hotel's casino without anything more than mild disappointment. On the 15th, he'd been joined by a lady friend he introduced as Ariana Cattermole, his new bride. Naturally, Reg already knew that Herbert Cattermole still had a wife back in Britain who he'd never divorced (or even told that he was leaving before his departure) and her name was *not* Ariana.

Herbert and his young (and bigamous) bride spent a few days quietly enjoying the sights and amenities of St. Cyprian, and according to one noise complaint made to the hotel manager, they spent a few nights loudly enjoying one another. On the 19th, Cattermole removed all of his money (a sizeable sum) from the hotel vault, saying that he and his wife would be traveling on to America the following day. The next morning, he was found dead in his room. There was no sign of Ariana or any of her personal effects or any of Cattermole's money. The Killing Curse was swiftly identified as the cause of death.

Frustratingly, there were no pictures of Ariana Cattermole, but there were a few witness interviews that described her as a platinum blonde, young (far too young for a man of Herbert's age, though she was of-age herself), and

stunningly beautiful. One detail noted was that upon arrival, the woman insisted that a copy of the Daily Prophet be specially delivered every morning and then brought up to their room. In a folded pocket of the case folder, Regulus found a small envelope with a preservation charm on it. From inside, he withdrew what appeared to be the 16 November 1981 issue which had been delivered to the room three days after its British publication. The headline, to Reg's surprise, was a story about Lucius Malfoy's exoneration and release from jail after Sirius Black's "shocking confession" about placing the young Wizengamot Lord under the Imperius.

The only other thing in the packet was the charred remains of what appeared to be Herbert and Ariana's wedding certificate. Although most of it was illegible and too far gone for a standard *Reparo*, Regulus was able to use some more obscure evidence-preservation Charms he'd learned as an Australian Auror, Charms probably unknown here on St. Cyprian. After a few seconds, the certificate repaired itself, and Regulus was surprised to see the mystery-woman's full maiden name: *Ariana McFlossy*.

He laughed for a second at the name, which he thought silly even by the standards of wizards. But then, he paused and reconsidered the newspaper headline, eventually looking back and forth between the article and the certificate as he considered what he knew. He pulled out his wand and cast the name *Ariana McFlossy* into the air in flaming letters. Then, he studied the name for several seconds as his expression darkened. With an angry slash of his wand, the letters began to move and reassemble until they spelled out a different name.

***Narcissa Malfoy***

"I swear," he muttered in annoyance. "What *is it* with Death Eaters and *anagrams*?!"

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## ***11 February 1994***

Lucius Malfoy bit into a crystalized pineapple and thought about how long he should continue to use flattery before resorting to blunt threats. He had never been an acolyte of Horace Slughorn, but he respected the man's abilities, both as a potioneer and as a power-broker. If only he weren't so ... *unctuous*.

"I must say how wonderful it is to see you again, Lucius, my boy!" said the corpulent retired Potions Master. "But, if I may be so bold, what has brought you to my humble abode? I've sent you many invitations to my special candle-light suppers for members of my old Slug Club who've gone on to bigger and better things, but you've never replied. You really should come, Lucius! For my next one, we shall be partaking of the Dowager Lady Ursula's home-made gooseberry wine!"

"That does indeed sound delightful, Horace," Malfoy said languidly. "And I shall certainly do my best to attend your next soirée. But I am here today on a matter of some urgency, so I hope you will forgive any brusqueness on my part." He paused and then decided he might as well sweeten the pot. "You see, Horace, I have a meeting this afternoon with the Minister. You know how much he relies on my insights."

"Minister Fudge? Oh what a coup! I haven't seen dear little Corny in years. I must say I'm astonished at how far he's come. Looking back, I do regret never inviting him to a Slug Club gathering. I guess it proves the old saying: *You never*

*know how some people will turn out.* But I digress. Of course, I will help you if I can. What do you need of me, Lucius? A potion, a letter of introduction, or just a bit of gossip."

The portly wizard chuckled and then took another sip of tea, while Lucius chose his next words carefully.

"The latter, I suppose. Tell me, Horace. Do you recall a Slytherin student – he would have been many, many years before me – by the name of Tom Marvolo Riddle?"

The tea cup fell to the floor. Lucius crooked an eyebrow. That Slughorn remembered Tom Riddle was not a great surprise, but his loss of composure at the mere mention of the name certainly was.

"R-r-riddle?" Slughorn stammered. "My word, that's a name I haven't heard in years! However did you hear of him? I thought he'd died ages ago!"

"Yes, so I have been told. Indeed, the consensus is that he was murdered by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Have you heard any rumors about that?"

"W-w-well, not that *specific* detail," he said as he picked up the now-empty cup. "*Though hardly surprising,*" Slughorn muttered under his breath. "But I've no idea what any of that has to do with me, Lucius."

"Oh?" Lucius replied brightly with a smile. "I was given to understand that you were ... *quite fond* of the *young* Mr. Riddle back in the day."

Everyone in the Azkaban cabal had skills they brought to the table. One skill (among many) that Lucius Malfoy offered was being able to spot another person's point of



weakness. To know what words or deeds would break another's resistance. And to know where and how to strike.

The older man's face darkened angrily at the insinuation. "What are you *implying*, Lucius?"

Malfoy's face assumed a mask of innocence. "Oh, certainly nothing ... *prurient*, Horace. Though, well, you *know* how baseless rumors can spread. What's the old Muggle saying? A lie can be halfway around the world before the truth has finished pulling up its trousers."

Slughorn stared at his former student, the one who he was quite certain had once been a Death Eater, no matter what the papers said. Slowly, he leaned forward and placed the tea cup back in its saucer on the table before him.

"Lucius, we are both Slytherins and we are alone. There is no need for shadow-dancing. Why are you really here? What do you *want*?"

"As I said, information. Tell me, Horace. What do you know of ... *horcruxes*?"

The other man gasped in horror. Malfoy smiled. He knew Horace Slughorn would normally have more composure than this. But the man was notorious for giving his most prized students insights into obscure and occasionally forbidden magic if his vanity was stroked enough. And while Lord Voldemort rarely worried about the feelings of others, Tom Riddle was supremely skilled at plying others to do his bidding through subtlety rather than terror. Slughorn's reaction to the mention of horcruxes on the heels of his reaction to Riddle's name confirmed Lucius's suspicions. Tom Riddle *had* approached his most favorite and doting professor for more information about the forbidden spell.

"I ... I know nothing of such things!" Slughorn exclaimed.

"Well, you *certainly* know enough to be disturbed by the mention of it. Did you react this way when Tom Riddle asked you about the topic?"

"Enough!" Slughorn shouted as he jumped up out of his chair. "This discussion is *over*! I must ask you to leave now, Lord Malfoy!"

Lucius rose but more casually. "Very well, sir. I'm sorry you can't help me. I suppose I shall have to look for ... *other* sources who can answer my questions about your ... *relationship* with young Riddle."

Slughorn sputtered angrily. "We had no *relationship* other than pupil and student!"

"Oh, I believe you, Horace, I believe you. But, well, you *know* how people like to talk. I can only promise to do my best in my efforts to find out details about the late Mr. Riddle's life and death to prevent any unfounded rumors from being spread about him that might falsely implicate you."

The older man closed his eyes as if in defeat. After a long painful moment, he began his tale.

"Tom ... came to me once during his Sixth Year. He said ... said that he'd come across the horcrux in the Restricted Section. He asked me for more information. I told him I didn't know anything about it. And then, I told him I never wanted to hear him mention that word again and sent him away. That's all that happened. *I swear!*"

"Well, *sir*, if that's the case, I don't see why you would object to providing me with a pensieve memory of that encounter."

Slughorn shook his head as if he didn't want to relieve the memory. "But why, Lucius? Why are you so interested in what a Muggleborn who died decades ago wanted to learn about dark magic? Why does it matter?"

Lucius studied his former Head of House and wondered whether to lie or simply evade. He chose the latter.

"Because as it so happens, whatever Tom Marvolo Riddle learned about horcruxes, that information eventually fell into the hands of *You-Know-Who*!"

Slughorn looked as if he might faint at the news. Lucius leaned forward and calmly plucked another crystallized pineapple out of the bowl on the table, as if he had not just revealed one of the most portentous secrets of all Wizarding Britain.

"And so, the memory, if you please," he added politely before popping the candy into his mouth.

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### ***An hour later in the Ministry of Magic...***

Lucius strode confidently into the private office of Cornelius Fudge with Slughorn's memory resting in a vial in his pocket.

"Lucius!" the Minister said jovially. But it was a false joviality, Malfoy realized at once. "Thank you for coming!"

"I am always available for the Minister of Magic, good sir. Indeed, in light of current events, I'd been expecting your invitation for many months now and despaired of ever being called upon. How may I be of service?"

Fudge had the decency to blush at the implied rebuke. "Please! Take a seat. And I do apologize for any offense I may have given by avoiding you since ... well, you know."

"Since the Azkaban break-out," Malfoy replied blandly. "And as I was forced to serve You-Know-Who while under the Imperius – *and* I was formerly married to a member of House Black which supported You-Know-Who openly — you had doubts as to my loyalty."

Fudge blushed deeper. "Lucius ... I am sorry. I have *never* doubted *your* loyalty. But you know the demands of politics, especially in a time of national panic. The nation was up in arms about the Death Eater menace. I have no doubts about your innocence, my friend, just as I have never doubted your support. But someone who was cursed with the Imperius once could be again. I thought that if I relied too heavily on people who, as you said, were former Death Eaters albeit unwilling ones, it might cause the public to doubt *me* right when I needed as much support as possible."

"Say no more, Minister," Lucius said with highly convincing sincerity. "I fully understand the conflicting strains you were under, and you were probably wise to have acted as you did. Think no more of it. Now again, how may I serve the Ministry?"

"To be honest, Lucius," said Fudge as the two men took their seats across from each other at the Minister's desk, "I don't know that you can. But I would be remiss if I didn't ask your advice since no one else I've talked to has had any good suggestions to offer."

The Minister paused and took a deep breath.

"By any chance, have you ever heard of ... the Treaty of Azkaban?"

It was a testament to Lucius Malfoy's skill as an Occlumens that when he left the Ministry of Magic three hours later, at no point had he started screaming in outraged fury.

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## ***Hogsmeade***

### ***12 February 2012***

While the first Hogsmeade Weekend of the 1993-94 school year was an unmitigated disaster, the second went off without a hitch, and so, the Fudge Administration decided to test its luck. For the February weekend (which coincided with St. Valentine's Day and thus was an important day for Hogsmeade merchants), a full dozen Aurors were dispatched to the hamlet, and after some persuasion by the Minister, Dumbledore agreed to relax the curfew slightly. For this Saturday only, students in Third Year or higher could exercise Hogsmeade privileges even if they could only cast the mist-form Patronus instead of just those few who could summon a corporeal one.

This development was quite convenient for Harry because despite his best efforts, that was as far as he'd gotten with the Patronus Charm, and on this day, he *really* needed to visit Hogsmeade. Alas, he was not optimistic about persuading Jim to let him borrow the Potter cloak any time soon, and his Disillusionment Charm was still a work in progress. (He still couldn't reliably render his feet invisible, and on one embarrassing occasion, he'd somehow managed to turn all his clothing transparent and been unable to restore them. Theo and Blaise, who'd been with him in the empty classroom where he cast the botched spell, had simply looked at each other and then ran out laughing,

leaving him to hide effectively naked in a supply closet until the spell wore off three hours later. They were completely unrepentant.)

After a few hours spent shopping, Harry and Neville made their way to the Three Broomsticks for lunch in a private room with Lady Augusta. Snape, Regulus (in disguise), Rufus, and Lucius were already in attendance. The remaining members of the cabal (or the Azkabal, as Sirius had jokingly christened it) were back at Longbottom Manor, listening in through Regulus's magic mirror. After the two boys entered the room, all three of the adult Slytherins each insisted on putting up their own privacy charms, as apparently none of them trusted the others to properly do the job.

"*Ahem!*" Lady Augusta said with disdain. "If you've all quite finished displaying your competing paranoias, may we get to the point of this meeting? Lucius, why were you so insistent that we meet as quickly as possible? And that Neville and Harry be present?"

"To be honest, Lady Augusta," Lord Malfoy replied, "I only wanted Mr. Potter here because, like Scrimgeour, he possesses a powerful deductive insight, but I assumed that it would be less suspicious if he came with your grandson ostensibly to lunch with you. I have obtained a memory from Horace Slughorn that depicts a conversation between him and a young Tom Marvolo Riddle. Since Potter is the only one of us to have ever seen the Dark Lord as a young man, albeit in the form of a debased copy, I wanted his impressions. Also, the memory takes place at Hogwarts. If there's any useful clues to be obtained, he as a student might be in a position to investigate further."

"But first," Lucius continued with obvious trepidation. "There has been ... a development. One which I wanted to share with the group as it may affect our future deliberations." He took a deep breath. "Yesterday, I had a meeting with Minister Fudge, and he took it upon himself to reveal to me a state secret of terrible import. Apparently, there is an official *treaty* between Wizarding Britain ... and *the Dementors of Azkaban*. And among the many other provisions of this treaty is one that requires our government to maintain a minimum population of inmates in the maximum-security level of Azkaban Prison. Our little jailbreak has reduced that population to below the treaty's requirements. Thankfully, even excluding Sirius and Bellatrix, we can meet those requirements *if* the Lestranges and Rookwood are returned to Ministry custody before August 1st of this year. But if we fail to timely hand them over – or worse, if it turns out memory-wiped prisoners *count as dead* as far as Dementors are concerned – the treaty will become a nullity and the Dementors will be free to leave Azkaban and attack Britain en masse!"

A shocked silence fell over the room.

"What *idiot* set that up?!" exclaimed Regulus.

"Thorfin Rowle's thrice-great grandfather," Lucius replied tartly. "He was Minister at the time of the Treaty's ratification. Based on Thorfin's career as a Death Eater, I assume stupidity is a common family trait."

"Okay, obviously this is bad," Harry interrupted. "But it's not the end of the world. I mean, we do still have three Death Eaters left. Mr. Malfoy, are you sure that's enough to satisfy this Treaty thing?"

"According to Minister Fudge, yes. However, all three of them have been subjected to Tabula Rasa. And we do not know how Dementors will react to victims who have no bad memories or indeed *any* memories to trigger and who are thus incapable of suffering at the hands of Dementors in any meaningful way."

"One crisis at a time, Malfoy," Scrimgeour said gruffly. "We just need to accelerate our plans for getting Sirius cleared of the charges against him. If we can achieve that within the next two or three months and deliver our three prisoners to the Ministry simultaneously, that will be plenty of time for Fudge to arrange a fallback plan if the three amnesiacs are not suitable for Dementor-feeding purposes."

Several of the attendees winced at the former Auror's blunt description.

"Just what sort of fallback position can Minister Fudge have?" Neville asked. "It's not like maximum-security inmates can be obtained that easily."

All the Slytherins present snorted in unison at the Gryffindor's naivete.

"Mr. Longbottom," said Lucius patiently. "Cornelius Fudge is acting under authority of Praetor Maximus. Where the Azkaban Crisis is involved, he has near-dictatorial powers. Ethics and sentiment restrain him at the moment, but if no other options present themselves before the end of July, I am quite certain he will not be above snatching a trio of minor criminals off the streets, engineering a conviction for some Azkaban-worthy crime, and dispatching them to the Dementors forthwith."

Neville was suitably horrified by that idea, but Harry was more thoughtful.



"What about the three werewolves still in Auror custody?" he asked. "They're in Fenrir Greyback's pack. That's about the next best thing to being a Death Eater, isn't it?"

Lucius smiled evilly. "Clever boy! Unfortunately, I suggested that same possibility to the Minister, and he shot it down. The Treaty specifies that the maximum-security inmates must be wizards. The surviving werewolves still in custody were Muggles before being bitten."

"Let us return, for now, to other matters that we *can* address," said Snape, who'd been quiet up until now. "Rufus, you intimated that you had some ideas on clearing Sirius Black of the charges against him."

"I do. It's ... a bold plan. Distressingly so, I must admit. It borders on ... Gryffindorish!"

"Hey!" said Neville, who was echoed by Sirius through the mirror. Scrimgeour ignored the complaints and pulled a thick wad of bound papers from an attaché case. With a tap of his wand, the papers were copied and passed to each member of the group. Lucius studied the cover and then looked up at Rufus with a dubious expression.

"*The Betrayal of Sirius Black by the Death Eater Marcellus Frump*. So ... you have written ... a play?!"

Rufus grinned. "I have indeed. A gripping drama that details a heretofore unknown Death Eater named Marcellus Frump who was You-Know-Who's *true* right hand before he was captured and forced to confess his sins, only to be freed by Death Eater collaborators with his confession altered to frame Sirius Black instead."

Lucius barked out a laugh while everyone else stared at Scrimgeour as if he'd gone mad.

"And how will performing a play about this deception fool anyone?" Regulus asked.

Scrimgeour grinned cruelly. "Well, here's the thing. It is quite easy to tell when a memory has been altered if you know what to look for. But it's a very different thing to spot the deception when reviewing an *accurate memory of well-staged events*. We have the two Lestrangle Brothers. We can use them, along with some of us wearing altered forms either through Metamorphmagic or Polyjuice, to enact scenes from my little play and then withdraw pensieve memories of those scenes from the Lestranges immediately before their memories reset. Then, we just present the memories along with their bodies when we eventually turn them over to the authorities."

"How can we get the Lestranges to cooperate with this mad scheme if they are under the Tabula Rasa curse?" Augusta asked in confusion.

"Well," Rufus continued, "it occurs to me that anyone devoid of memory and unable to form new long-term ones would be *particularly* vulnerable to ... *mental persuasion*."

"What sort of mental ...?" Regulus began, but Lucius cut him off.

"He means the Imperius, Regulus. He expects someone to use the Imperius Curse to compel the Lestranges to perform the roles he would assign them."

"Well," Rufus said almost amiably, "we'd be foolish not to take advantage of the fact that we have among our number someone who is *so very skilled* at that particular curse. Wouldn't you agree, Lord Malfoy?"

Lucius said nothing. He simply glared at the older Slytherin who returned his gaze levelly. The others were also quiet at the thought of using an Unforgiveable to such an extent even on people like the Lestrangle Brothers. Finally, Lucius broke eye contact.

"We will discuss that facet of your plan later, Scrimgeour. For now, I would like to hear Regulus's report on how Sirius was falsely convicted in the first place. Regulus, were you able to locate Herbert Cattermole?"

Regulus stumbled a bit before answering. "Um, well, I found his grave, if that's what you mean. A few days after Sirius was arrested, Cattermole left Britain for the Bahamas in the company of a young witch he'd married bigamously. The name she used was Ariana McFlossy ... which is an anagram for *Narcissa Malfoy*. The two of them laid low at a casino hotel in the magical enclave of St. Cyprian until she got word that you'd been released from jail after Sirius's supposed confession. Then, she murdered Cattermole and returned to Britain."

"*Ariana McFlossy*," Lucius muttered with an amused sneer. He studied Regulus appraisingly. "How much of that can you prove?" he asked.

"I have recreated the marriage certificate. She signed a fake name, but it should still be her magical signature on it. I reckon the goblins could properly identify it. She's still wanted by the St. Cyprian Aurors today."

Malfoy nodded stoically before turning back to Rufus. "Do you think those details could be fit into your ... play?"

"Easily," the man answered breezily. "In fact, in this instance, the truth would be much more plausible than the

contrived storyline I came up with. You aiming to expose your wife as a secret Death Eater?"

"*Ex-wife*," Lucius answered coolly. "And yes. I am indeed."

He turned back to the group. "We will speak more on that later. Right now, our two youngest conspirators should return to the school soon. So let us take a moment to witness an important meeting between Horace Slughorn and young Tom Marvolo Riddle."

Lucius nodded at Harry who pulled his pensieve from a pocket and then expanded it on the table. Malfoy placed the memory he'd acquired inside, and then the group entered the memory.

To Neville's surprise, he was back in the room where the Hogwarts Cultural Preservation Society met, though in this earlier era, it was home to Horace Slughorn's informal group of select students that was known (bizarrely, Neville thought) as the *Slug Club*.

"Heh, I remember these Slug Club meetings," Regulus said. "Dreadfully boring, but the food was usually pretty good."

"When was this memory, Lucius?" asked Augusta.

"1943," Malfoy answered. "November, I think."

The party had broken up, and most of the students had already left. But one remained, a handsome lad in a Slytherin tie and a prefect's badge who Harry had recognized at once. Indeed, Tom Riddle had barely changed from the 15-year-old manifestation that had haunted the Diary. Within minutes, everyone else had left, and Slughorn was surprised to find that Riddle was still present.

*"Look sharp, Tom," said Slughorn, turning around and finding him still present. "You don't want to be caught out of bed out of hour, and you a prefect..."*

*"Sir, I wanted to ask you something."*

*"Ask away, then, m'boy, ask away...."*

*"Sir, I wondered what you know about ... about Horcruxes?"*

Upon hearing the word, Slughorn instantly grew angry.

*"I don't know anything about Horcruxes and I wouldn't tell you if I did! Now get out of here at once and don't let me catch you mentioning it again!"*

"Pause," said Severus Snape just before the memory could end naturally. In response, the memory froze, though the observers could still walk around within it. The Potions Master studied the scene carefully. Then, to Harry's surprise, he stopped in front of the memory of Horace Slughorn and poked him forcefully through the chest. As he pulled his finger back out, an inky fog trailed after it.

"Fake," he said. "This memory has been subjected to the False Memory Charm."

Of those present, only Rufus and Harry were unsurprised.

"Are you sure?" Lucius asked.

"He is, and so am I," said Scrimgeour. "I suspected it as soon as Old Sluggy got to his furious denial. That's not the memory of someone moving and talking. It's a construct based on how someone would have *imagined* him moving and talking if he had, in fact, done and said those things. No matter how perfectly realistic a false memory is, it can't

stand up to any degree of Legilimency when viewed in a pensieve. The body language never looks quite right."

He turned to Harry. "Do you concur, Mr. Potter?"

Harry shrugged. "I knew something about the scene was ... off. I wouldn't have known to call it a False Memory Charm until you explained it, but I agree that it looks ... fake."

"Still, the memory has value, even if altered," said Snape. "The setting looks genuine enough, and the exchange seemed accurate up until the end. I suspect a conversation like this did occur between Slughorn and Riddle. Only at the end did the memory become obviously tainted."

Regulus seemed dubious. "So, what, you think Slughorn actually answered Riddle's question? About horcruxes? How could he have even known anything about the topic?"

"He learned the same way I did," answered Rufus with some distaste. "And for the same reason. Horace is ... *a collector*."

After the group finished their meeting, Lucius Malfoy pulled Harry aside and set up a privacy charm. The boy looked at him in surprise but without concern.

"I have some information for you, Mr. Potter. Information I wish you to pass on to the Outcast."

"Oh?" Harry said cautiously.

Lucius nodded grimly. "According to my informants, it appears my former wife has taken up with his former father. I do not know that the information will be of any value to Mr. No-Name, but, well, he *is* a Slytherin after all. If he can make some use of the insight in his own affairs,

I'm sure I can turn it to my advantage in my own future dealings with Tiberius and Narcissa."

Harry studied the older man intently. "I was given to understand that you were fully under the effects of the Ultimate Sanction and so had little concern for Theo."

"I am, and I don't, Potter. But the enemy of my enemy and all that. In this instance, the artificial disdain I have for Theo No-Name is eclipsed by the quite-genuine loathing I have for Narcissa Black."

Harry's eyebrows rose at the blunt admission. "How on earth did you two end up married if you feel that way?"

Lucius's face darkened. "That is none of your concern, Potter. Suffice it to say that mistakes were made, and except for Draco, nothing good ever came of them."

But then, Malfoy studied Harry's face more intently, and his demeanor softened a bit. "Still, you are an ally, and puberty beckons. And so, I feel I should warn you that Narcissa Black has access to an artificial form of *Veela allure*. Do bear that in mind if you ever find yourself in her presence."

As Lucius dispelled the secrecy charms, Harry grew queasy at the thought of Draco Malfoy's *mother* trying to seduce him at some point. He resolved to learn more about "*Veela allure*" and how best to resist it.

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### **13 February 1994**

A random empty classroom coopted by The Goldstein Group  
3:00 p.m.

"The Goldstein Group?" Blaise said with a dubious

expression. "Seriously? And you're okay with that Hermione? Su?"

Hermione shrugged before returning to the runes she'd been carving into the underside of a wooden table.

"Oh no," said Sue Li, "I'm mad as hell about it actually. But fair is fair. Hermione didn't care what we called our research team, and Anthony beat me in Rock-Paper-Scissors."

"And it's a good thing too," Anthony Goldstein said heatedly, "since *you* wanted to call us the *Li*-gion of Doom."

"Well, okay," Harry interrupted. "Now that we've answered the exciting question of what your Ancient Runes team is called, can we get to the reason we're here?"

That reason had to do with the discovery by Harry and several of his friends that Hermione had been brewing large quantities of Pepper-Up Potion and other similar potions in a magically-hidden toilet stall in Myrtle's bathroom. After hemming nervously and then angrily denying Blaise's suggestion that she might have "*a potion problem*," the witch finally revealed the truth.

Hermione's Ancient Runes team (the aforementioned "Goldstein Group") had chosen for its end-of-year project a security ward scheme. An ambitious project for a trio of Third Years, the scheme was one that could be carved into a stationary object that met certain parameters, one such as the oak table that Hermione was presently defacing. Once properly prepared, anyone who had been keyed into the runic pattern could call out an activation phrase, and the rune scheme carved into the object would generate an area-of-effect stunner that would render anyone in range unconscious. To alleviate their concerns about her supposed



"potions habit," she invited Harry, Theo, and Blaise to a meeting of the group.

"Wait a minute," Theo interjected after the project had been explained. "You're making a delayed action stunner that anyone could fire off wandlessly with just a password? There's no way a few Third Years could come up with something like that!"

Anthony chuckled. "Well, I wish I could say '*of course we could - we're all geniuses*,' but the truth is ... this wasn't even that hard. That is to say, the rune scheme itself isn't overly difficult. *But* it will only work for us because we're at Hogwarts and there's plenty of ambient magic to fuel it. That's the problem with runic wards - they usually need ambient magic, which means they need access to ley lines or the equivalent."

"So what's the point of this then?" Harry asked.

"Basically, it's just a proof of concept," Sue Li answered. "Our idea was to present it as a security feature. Shops in Diagon Alley and other magical communities often tap into ley lines to power security wards. This one can be put anywhere in a shop and if somebody tries to hold the place up, the owner or manager can just yell out the activation phrase, the ward will go off, and the bad guys get knocked out without anyone else being affected."

"And does it work?" an impressed Blaise asked. Sue and Anthony both gave pained expressions.

"Not ... yet," Goldstein finally said. "We're close. I'm sure of it. But right now, the effects are limited. The range on the rune scheme is only a few feet, and only one person can be keyed into this ward to give the activation phrase. So right

now, it's not very effective at knocking out a group of intruders while leaving more than one person unaffected."

Harry nodded at that. "Alright. Sounds like you're on your way to a good grade from Babbling."

"*Professor* Babbling," said Hermione absent-mindedly from beneath the table.

"*But* none of that explains why you have Hermione brewing Pepper-Up Potions in a bathroom."

"Well," Hermione answered while pulling herself up off the floor. "I was using Myrtle's bathroom because virtually no one goes in there. Although apparently, *you three* seem to have chosen a haunted girls' toilet for your own probably illicit experiments and discovered my cauldron. As for why I was brewing Pepper-Up, it's for our research subjects."

With that, she gestured over to a corner where Colin Creevey, Lee Jordan, and four other Gryffindors Harry didn't know were standing around and somewhat nervously listening to her explanation.

"Normally, a Stunner will put someone out for hours. And even with a Reviving Spell, a stunning victim will feel groggy and out of sorts for quite some time. So we follow up our spells with a shot of Pepper-Up so no one gets sick or misses any class time. Nothing more to it. Satisfied?"

Blaise and Theo turned to Harry who simply studied the Gryffindor witch.

"Conditionally," he finally said. "So, do we get to see your project in action?" Anthony and Sue Li glanced at one another nervously.

"Don't worry," Harry continued. "We won't be ripping off your work. Blaise and I are working on a rune scheme that improves Protego Orbis."

Mollified by the explanation, she ushered the three Slytherins to the opposite side of the room while Anthony and Hermione carefully positioned the "test subjects" around the table at varying distances from it.

"How did you get them to go along with this?" Theo asked.

"Money, of course," Anthony replied. "Hermione set it up. Ten sickles every time they get knocked out."

Harry looked over towards Hermione in surprise. "*Weirdness*" was one thing, but he'd not expected his friend to be so ... mercenary. As he watched, Sue and Hermione walked around behind the test subjects conjuring large pillows on the floor behind them.

Anthony flicked his wand to a nearby desk, and in response, a quill jumped up and began taking dictation.

"This is Experiment 6.1 on 13 February 1994 at 3:09 p.m. Test subjects are in position." As he spoke, Sue joined him and the three Slytherins against the wall and threw up a shield spell while Hermione moved to the opposite wall. "Test begins in Three. Two. One. Go."

At that instruction, Hermione took a single step towards the table and said the activation word. "Morpheus!" Nothing happened. She took another step and repeated the word. Then, another. And another. Finally, after six paces, she said "Morpheus!" again, and the rune triggered. There was a flash of red light emanating from the table, and four of the six test subjects fell down onto the pillows unconscious. The other two remained standing and exhaled in relief.

Instantly, Hermione flicked her wand and shot off a spell towards the table that caused ghostly numbers to appear in the air in front of her.

"The rune finally activated when I was 2.85 meters away from the table. It affected all targets who were within a 2.73-meter radius of the table."

"Excellent!" Anthony exclaimed. "That's a big improvement over last week."

"What's a meter?" Theo asked.

"Muggle unit of distance," Harry answered idly.

"Indeed," Anthony added somewhat smugly. "And one much better suited to scientific experimentation than Imperial measurements."

"So where the heck did you find a Charm that measures things in *meters*?" Blaise asked. "I've literally never heard a wizard use metric terms."

"Ravenclaw library. A member of my house came up with it decades ago." Anthony smiled. "Perhaps you've heard of him. *Alexander McAvity*."

The three Slytherins recognized the notorious "*Muggleborn Dark Lord*" they'd learned about the year before from Professor Lockhart. The fact that McAvity had been a Ravenclaw was news, however.

"Which is why the spell isn't known well outside of Ravenclaw," Sue added, "though we were happy to share it with Hermione. Alas, the Purebloods in our house don't know or care about the advantages of the metric system, or really anything about proper experimental procedure. I

gather that Pureblood Preservation Society or whatever they're calling it is spreading all kinds of lurid nonsense about McAvity and his followers, and we'd appreciate it if you don't tell them that Ant and I were engaged in '*dark experiments*' or whatever."

Harry and his friends agreed. "So what's next?" he asked.

"We use Renervate to wake up the sleeping Gryffindors and then let them rest for a bit while we tweak the rune scheme," Hermione said.

"And give them Pepper-Up Potions, I suppose?"

"Only at the end of the session," Anthony answered. "We don't want to give them too many. I don't want them to be up half the night unable to sleep, now do we."

Hermione took a step forward. "Well, Harry? Are you more than *conditionally* satisfied?"

He looked at her levelly. "Yes, I suppose I'm fully satisfied at this point."

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### ***Two hours later ...***

After the Goldstein Group completed its session for the day, Hermione found herself walking alone towards Gryffindor Tower (the test subjects having left immediately after payment). She was surprised to find Harry Potter sitting on the steps leading up to her dorm. As she walked over to him, he folded what looked like a map of some kind and slipped it into his robe.

"Harry?" she said cautiously. He patted the step he was sitting on.

"Have a seat, Hermione. Let's talk."

She folded her arms in front of her and made no move to sit. "I thought you said you were fully satisfied."

"I did and I am. I am now *fully satisfied* that you are abusing Pepper-Up potions to make up for lost sleep, but I wanted to talk to you one last time before I go see McGonagall about it."

"*Harry!* I've been brewing those potions for research purposes. I'm not abusing ...."

"I saw your cauldron, Hermione," he interrupted. "And your supply stock. And your recipe. And I also saw how much Anthony and Sue gave out to those Gryffs at the end of the session. And I know that you have been brewing *way more* Pepper-Up than you need just for Anthony's project. In fact, I'm now pretty sure that the *reason* you jumped on board Anthony's project is that you knew it would require lots of Pepper-Up and acting as the potioneer for the Goldstein Group gave you a cover for brewing it for your personal use."

He leaned back against the stairs and fixed her with his gaze. "Now, tell me I'm wrong."

She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Then, she looked away nervously, unable to meet his eye. Harry relaxed slightly. He'd realized as a Second Year that he found himself unable to lie to Hermione. It was oddly comforting to know that Hermione couldn't lie to him either.

"I'm ... I'm taking too many classes," she said. "I know that. Between my course load and SPAM and ... other things I'm working on, I haven't been getting enough sleep for a while. For months really. I don't think I'm *abusing* potions. But yes,

I am taking enough to get by on just a few hours of sleep a night.

"Hermione ...." Harry began, but she interrupted.

"Please don't tell on me, Harry!" she said urgently. "I promise ... it's not for much longer."

The Slytherin narrowed his eyes. "Meaning?"

"We leave for Easter Break on March 27th. Before then, I'll be dropping at least two classes. Maybe three. I still haven't decided for sure."

"Which ones?" Harry asked.

"Definitely Divination. Probably Muggle Studies. Maybe COMC."

"But why wait until the 27th if you already know you plan to drop these classes?"

She looked away while wringing her hands nervously. "Because Professor Trelawney predicted that someone would drop the class right before Easter?" she said unconvincingly.

"Hermione ..."

"It's *weirdness*, okay? I can't say anything more than that. But if you can just give me until Easter Break, I'll be done with it. And then, hopefully, I can tell you everything."

He stared at her, frustrated. "Will you at least promise to lay off the potions and get some *real* sleep?"

She nodded. "I promise. Real sleep. Five hours every night."

"*Hermione!*" he said warningly. "Eight hours."

She huffed. "Well now, that's just unreasonable. Do *you* sleep eight hours every night?"

Harry grimaced. "Six hours on school nights. And you sleep in until 10:00 on Saturday and Sunday."

She smiled. "Deal." Then, she headed up the stairs while Harry rose and started in the direction of the dungeons. Before he could get too far, she froze as if a sudden inspiration had seized her. She turned around and called out to her friend.

"Harry, has Neville talked to you about Jim? Or Luna? Or maybe even Jim himself?"

"About what?" he responded.

"*I'll take that as a no,*" she muttered. "I promised not to tell you this, but ... well, I've got the feeling it's something you should know. Please don't tell anyone I told you."

She looked around cautiously and cast a Muffliato. Then, she told him what she knew about Jim being placed under the Imperius Curse. Harry was suitably shocked.

"Do any suspects spring to mind?" she asked. "I'd assumed it had happened during the New Year's Ball."

The boy looked at his friend with a grim expression and an angry spark in his eyes. "It was Pettigrew. I just know it."

"Harry, I know you don't care for Pettigrew and that he seems to feel the same, but he's devoted to Jim." She paused. "Isn't he?"



"Maybe. Maybe not. But I do know that he's not to be trusted for reasons I can't just share with the rest of my family." He hesitated. "He's got ... *Quirrell* issues."

Hermione looked back at him dully. "Peter Pettigrew ... follows You-Know-Who?"

"I know it's hard to believe ...." he started, but the witch interrupted.

"No, no. If you say it, I believe it. Besides, it makes a weird sort of sense." She shook her head. "But why would he have cursed Jim? And what do we do about it?"

"I don't know as to the first question. And I don't see what we *can* do about the second. Jim and James both trust Peter completely. And I don't have any usable evidence right now."

"Then how are you so sure Pettigrew's a baddie?"

He winced and looked at her ruefully. "Weirdness on my part?"

Hermione laughed. "Well, that's fair, I suppose." Then, she grew more serious. "In light of this news, I should probably tell you something else about Peter Pettigrew."

"What?"

"He's coming to Hogwarts for a visit later this week. I heard Jim talking to Ron about it."

Harry closed his eyes. "Bugger," he said. Under the circumstances, Hermione didn't even feel the need to chastise him for the vulgarity.

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### ***That night in Harry's room ...***

Harry stared up at the ceiling over his bed, unable to sleep. The ramifications of Pettigrew (or anyone else for that matter) using the Imperius Curse on the Boy-Who-Lived were startling enough, but if Hermione was right, the secret Death Eater seemed to have done so for the express purpose of driving a wedge between Jim and Harry. And to make matters worse, neither of their parents had seemed interested in letting Harry in on the news, even though they both now knew about it. Of course, Dumbledore also knew about the Imperius, apparently, but Harry could hardly blame him for deferring to the Potters' wishes if they decided to keep their eldest son in the dark about things. And indeed, they might have done so for entirely legitimate reasons.

Or they might have done so because they suspected *him* of cursing Jim.

Or, worse, James and Lily might *themselves* have been cursed to distrust him but more subtly than Jim.

The boy sighed in frustration. Too many possibilities. Too many unknowns. He would just have to stay on his guard and be ready to react to whatever came next.

*"In the meantime,"* he thought to himself, *"I can at least try do something constructive in another area that I've put off for long enough."*

With that, Harry reached down to his bag on the floor and pulled out the Marauder's Map. Since Dumbledore had charged him with trying to figure out Remus Lupin's magically occluded Secret, he'd tried several strategies without success. In the course of those efforts, he'd also spent time over the holidays interacting with the younger

Map-versions of his father's old coterie. Somewhat annoyingly, his very first interaction with the young Peter Pettigrew had been the most productive, as it had at least given him insights into the adult Pettigrew's personality and also clues as to how he might have ended up a Death Eater.

Since then, he'd also interacted with the Map-versions of Remus Lupin and Sirius Black, but they were far less helpful, particularly when it came to ferreting out The Secret. Map-Remus had been twitchy and nervous without any of the Zen placidity of the real Lupin. Apparently, twelve years or so in Shamballa had been good for the man's nerves if nothing else. Sirius, on the other hand, was equally twitchy but for more specific reasons. Apparently, Black had last handled the Map on the night of The Prank, which was a topic he absolutely refused to talk about. Instead, Sirius was aggressively fixated on Harry's Quidditch skills, any "pranks" he might want to perform, and his dating history. To Harry's embarrassment, Sirius told him that his own father had ensured that Sirius's virginity had been taken at a French brothel on the occasion of his 15th birthday, and so he was full of "advice." Regardless, neither Lupin nor Black had provided any insights as to The Secret.

*Or* if they did, those insights did not survive the Fidelius. In point of fact, Harry had a strong feeling that both Remus and Sirius might well have revealed Lupin's Secret only for him to forget it once he'd left the confines of the Map. If he could confirm that to be the case, he would have to admit defeat and report his findings to the Headmaster, as meager as they were.

Only one avenue was left to try, and Harry had been resisting it: Map-James. Apparently, his father had been the last person to handle the Map before it was confiscated by

Argus Filch while the young Gryffindor was on his way back to his dormitory after the Prank's conclusion. Harry was still fuzzy on what all happened during The Prank, even after talking with Map-Remus and Map-Sirius (and, of course, listening to Real-Sirius's confession over the Christmas break). The short version was that Sirius maliciously tricked Snape into visiting the Shrieking Shack at a time when a transformed werewolf was there. Specifically, the mysterious "Moony" after whom Remus Lupin was later named.

Harry tapped the Map with his wand. "*I solemnly swear I'm up to no good.*" In response, the Map came to life.

"James? Er, I mean ... Dad? It's Harry. Can we ... um, talk, I guess?"

Once more, a light erupted from the Map, and Harry felt himself falling into a deep hole with a sense of vertigo that quickly ceased as he materialized in a comfy sofa in the now familiar Gryffindor Common Room. And sitting across from him was a chipper, earnest, yet slightly-nervous James Potter (aged 16). To Harry's surprise, the other boy seemed slightly disheveled, and there were dirt stains on his clothes. Then, he realized - this manifestation of James Potter was fixed by the Map only a short time after The Prank, when Potter had somehow saved Severus Snape from a fully-transformed werewolf.

"Welcome to Gryffindor Tower, Harry!" James said somewhat breathlessly. "Not that you don't already know your way around here, being a Lion yourself! Ha! Has the place changed much since my day?"

"Not too much," Harry said, though he actually had no idea whether that was true or not. "Some of the furniture looks

different. I'm sure it got restuffed at some point."

James nodded but then suddenly seemed at a loss for words, and Harry was unnerved to see how intently the other figure was studying his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's just ... a bit weird is all. Kind of like looking into a funhouse mirror. I bet you get that a lot, huh. '*Hey! You look just like your old man! Except with your mum's eyes!*' Same wild Potter Hair as me and my own dad!"

Harry chuckled. "Well, you can't fight genetics, I guess."

In point of fact, he had long since mastered the problem of Potter Hair with the aid of Sleekeazy, but he made a point of mussing his hair before entering the Map, just as he'd swapped out his old wire-rimmed glasses for the magical Wayfarers he'd become accustomed to. It wouldn't do, after all, for any of the Marauders to notice the snake emblem on the sides.

James's forehead crinkled in confusion. "Genetics?" he asked, obviously unfamiliar with the scientific term.

"Never mind. It's a Muggle thing ... Mum explained it to me once."

"Ah yes ... *Mum!*" He shook his head in amazement. "I still honestly can't believe it. That Lily and I actually got together. I mean *get* together. And had a *baby together!*" He paused cautiously. "Are we ... are we happy? Did we do a good job raising you?"

"You and she were *awesome* parents," Harry lied effortlessly. "And you're still very much in love. It's ... kinda gross at times, to be honest. All that kissing and ... stuff."

"*YES!*" James actually gave a fist bump at that news. "That's such a relief. I was *sure* I'd blown it for good."

"Oh?" the Slytherin said with curiosity. "How so?"

James paused to consider the question. "Before I answer that, can I ask a few things?"

"Hmm. Uncle Remus said I shouldn't tell you guys too much about your futures."

"I know, I know. Just a few general questions so I can avoid telling you things that grown-up me won't want you to know. Are all of us Marauders still friends? Were they all around to look after you when you were growing up? To be honest, we're ... going through a rough patch right now, and I've been very worried that it might split us up."

Harry nodded sagely. "You mean, because of ... The Prank."

James blinked in surprise. "You know about that?"

"Oh yeah. I know it was a big deal when it happened, but in time, you'll get past it."

The Gryffindor exhaled in relief. "Thank Merlin. And I suppose Lily forgives me too. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here."

"Was she that upset with you over it?"

James looked embarrassed and rubbed the back of his neck anxiously. "Honestly, by the time I lost the Map, we hadn't talked about it yet. That's why I've been so nervous about it. We're about a week out from the first Hogsmeade Weekend of our Sixth Year. At the start of term, she walked right up to me and said she'd go out with me to Hogsmeade, but

only if I make it to that weekend without performing a single prank. And then, of all things, *Padfoot* flips out and sends *Snivellus* down to .... Wait a minute, sorry. I shouldn't say too much. First of all, do you know who Padfoot is?"

Harry laughed. "Of course! It's my godfather and your best friend, Sirius Black. I still have a stuffed black dog he gave me when I was a baby in a closet somewhere." With that lie, Harry suddenly wondered for the first time, whatever happened to that old stuffed dog, but he pushed that curiosity aside.

James nodded at that. "And I *know* you know who *Snivellus* is. Do you ... do you know about Remus's ... furry little problem?"

"Well," Harry said slowly as he prepared perhaps his most ambitious lie to date. "That's kind of why I wanted to speak with you tonight. To find out more about Remus's furry little problem."

James leaned back suddenly. "Whoa now. If you don't already know it, I can't tell you anything about it. We made a Marauder's Oath!"

Harry, who was quite sure a "Marauder's Oath" had all the magical force of tissue paper, nodded in understanding. "Oh, I know, I know. You told me all about that years ago. And I'm pretty sure you told me the truth about Uncle Remus. I just ... don't remember it."

The other boy crooked an eyebrow. "You ... don't remember it? What? Did you get hit with a Bludger or something?"

Harry shook his head. "See, here's the thing: Headmaster Dumbledore has Remus working on a special project

involving something called the Fidelius Charm. Ever heard of it?"

James shook his head. "Sounds obscure. Wait ... Remus is working with Dumbles?" He grew excited. "Is Moony working at Hogwarts in your time?" Harry nodded. "That's *wonderful*! I always knew he was the most academic of us all. I mean, Sirius and I have a lot of natural skill, but we both are pants when it comes to self-discipline and work ethic. Moony was the one who studied like mad for everything. What does he teach? DADA? I bet he'd be amazing at that."

"He does indeed teach defense," Harry said evasively. Granted, it was an extracurricular martial arts defense, but the principle applied. "Anyway, this Fidelius thingy is a Charm that lets you hide a Secret so perfectly that it's supposed to be impossible to figure out unless you hear it first hand from some bloke whose been appointed the official Secret Keeper. And to test it out, Remus and the Headmaster asked me to try to figure out Remus's Secret, even though I've been *told* the Secret already but can't remember it. Or at least not all of it. I can remember some of the ... peripheral stuff about it, I guess."

"What do you mean ... peripheral stuff?"

Harry leaned back in his chair and started counting off "*Remus Facts*" with his fingers. "Well, I know it has something to do with wolves. I know Remus is nicknamed Moony. I know you have some other friend also nicknamed Moony who is a *werewolf* that Uncle Sirius, in a really badly thought-out prank, tried to feed Severus Snape to." James winced at that description. "And I know there's some connection between Remus and the werewolf besides the fact that they're both named Moony."



James stared at him. "You're ... you're fucking with me, right?"

Harry shook his head. "Nope. And here's the real kicker. You ... I mean, the grown-up You ... told me that if I can figure out this Secret, I get a new Firebolt out of it."

"A Fire-what?"

"Bolt. Firebolt. It's the absolute best broom in existence as of 1994."

Harry then proceeded to describe the properties of the Firebolt in salivating detail as Map-James's eyes widened in wonderment.

"Say no more. It would be a *crime* if I didn't do whatever I could to help you win such a prize. I mean, it's for academic research, after all! What can I do?"

Harry took a deep breath. "Can you show me ... The Prank?"

It took a little more persuasion, but not much. In a perverse way, Harry actually managed to play off Map-James's help as a way of pranking his own adult self and in a way that Lily would approve of. A few minutes later, the features of the Gryffindor Common Room faded away to be replaced by a rough-hewn subterranean tunnel that, from what Harry had already been told, connected the Whomping Willow to the Shrieking Shack in Hogsmeade.

There was a strange sense of dislocation, and Harry realized it was the sensation of viewing the memory of someone who was running as fast as they could down a narrow tunnel.

"SNAPE! COME BACK! YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING!" The echoes of Memory-Potter's desperate yells reverberated in Harry's ears. Up ahead, he could just make out a young Memory-Snape illuminated by a shaky Lumos. "SNAPE! FOR MERLIN'S SAKE, STOP!"

Undeterred, Snape rushed forward and threw open the door at the end of the tunnel before falling back with a scream of pure terror. Then, the sensation of flying down the corridor ended and Harry found himself standing next to Map-James and just a few feet behind Memory-James. Ahead lay Memory-Snape on the ground. And looming over him was a nightmare. The memory-form of the mysterious "Moony" in all his lupine glory. The werewolf was not as big as the one from Gilderoy Lockhart's infamous demonstration during Harry's Second Year, and its fur was silvery-gray instead of black, but the creature's presence was no less imposing. Instinctively, Harry reinforced his Occlumency shields against the unnatural fear emanating from this memory-of-a-memory.

"**PROTEGO!**" yelled Memory-James, and a brilliant shield appeared between Snape and the frenzied werewolf just before the beast could fall on its prey. It staggered back and let out a howl. In response, James lashed out with a Stunner so powerful that it blasted the werewolf back through the open doorway.

"**COLLOPORTUS!**" The door slammed shut with the angry werewolf still on the other side. James rushed over to where Snape was still cowering and whimpering on the ground.

"Come on, Snivellus! We need to get you out of here before it tries to bash through the door and come after you! Merlin, what an idiot you are!"

With that comment, the Gryffindor forcefully pulled the Slytherin up to his feet and started leading him away from the door.

"Well?" Map-James enquired of Harry in a helpful tone. "Did that jog any memories?"

Harry said nothing at first. He simply stared at the locked door with a powerful intensity.

"I need to get out of here," he finally said in a tight voice. "Right now."

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### ***Fifteen minutes later ...***

Severus Snape had only just begun to prepare for bed when he was startled by a loud banging on the door to his quarters. Grumbling, he made his way to the door and jerked it open, ready to harangue whoever dared to disturb him so late. That it was the Sensible Potter was a surprise. That Sensible Potter all but pushed his way into the room was a bigger surprise. That Sensible Potter was *babbling* was the biggest surprise of all.

"Sir, I apologize profusely for coming to see you so late, but I promise I wouldn't have except that this is incredibly important and I need to understand what I just saw and even though you'll probably be furious with me and hex me or give me detentions or give me detentions during which you hex me, I still think it's too important for me to wait until tomorrow, not that you'll be less angry with me if I ask you tomorrow...!"

"POTTER!" Snape barked. "Cease this gibbering *at once!* Five points from Slytherin for bursting into my rooms and another five for abandoning all sense of decorum! Now get

hold of yourself and tell me what you're doing here before I add detentions to those points!"

Harry paused and then took several calming breaths. Then, he produced his miniaturized Pensieve from a pocket and enlarged it with a tap of his wand before he finally spoke as calmly as he could.

"When you were in Sixth Year, Sirius Black manipulated you into an encounter with a werewolf. I need to see your memory of that encounter."

Snape's face blackened with rage. "You have exactly ten seconds, Potter," he snarled, "to explain to me why I should not put you in detention until your NEWTs for DARING to ask about THAT MEMORY!"

Harry gulped. "I'm sorry, Professor. It's ... it's not something I can explain easily. But ... I've just seen that memory from a different perspective. And in it, I saw something I don't understand. But something I think might be *incredibly* important."

"POTTER!"

"SIR!" Harry said forcefully. "It's *me*. You know me. Better than any adult I've ever been around. You know I'm not frivolous or given to pranks. Please, sir, if you have ever placed any value on my opinions – if you've ever thought I deserve to be in Slytherin – just let me see that memory!"

Snape glared at the boy for several seconds in silence while giving every impression of wanting to hex him.

"I will give you the memory. And then, you will explain in exacting detail what has led you to this. Your answer will

determine the extent and severity of your punishment. Do you understand?"

Harry nodded. Then, Snape stalked over and touched his wand to the corner of his eye before withdrawing the silvery liquid that was his memory of that terrifying night and depositing it in the bowl. Harry cautiously moved past him and then lowered his face into the bowl. After less than a minute, he was back out again, and he looked up at his Head of House with an expression the older Slytherin did not recognize but nevertheless found discomfiting.

"You should come with me and take a look sir," he said with an eerie calm.

Snape sneered. "I don't need to review the memory, *Potter!* I *lived it!*"

Harry gulped. "That's the thing, Professor. I don't believe you have."

*Cautiously, Severus Snape made his way down the dark passageway, his Lumos spell the only dim source of light. Finally, Snape could see a doorway twenty feet up ahead. He moved towards it carefully until, to his surprise, he heard a voice calling out to him from behind. A hated voice he recognized at once.*

*"SNAPE!" yelled James Potter in an urgent and possibly terrified voice. "COME BACK! YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING!"*

*The Slytherin sneered. If Potter was here and insistent that he not proceed, then obviously, this wasn't a Marauder trap after all. He quickly darted ahead to the door, heedless of the panicked voice of James Potter who was sprinting up the passageway behind him.*

*"SNAPE! FOR MERLIN'S SAKE, STOP!"*

*The Marauder was close behind, but not close enough.  
Snape grasped the handle of the door and pushed with all  
his might. The door flew open, and inside ....*

*GREY FUR  
SHARP TEETH  
YELLOW EYES  
HUGE CLAWS  
HUNGRY, SO HUNGRY  
AND SO FULL OF RAGE  
MAD HOWLING  
CHARGING TOWARDS ME  
PLEASE, I DON'T WANT TO DIE!*

"Pause!" Harry called out with authority, and the memory froze in response. The real Severus Snape stood next to him, his face pale but resolute as he confronted once more the vision of his nightmares in all its unholy glory. His memory-self was already on the ground, overcome by wolf-fear, while James Potter (*fucking Potter!*) was bringing his own wand to bear.

Snape sneered at the memory of his rival with contempt. "*The final indignity*," he thought. "*Saved by St. Potter himself.*"

But then, to his surprise, Harry stepped forward, past Memory-James, past the cowering Memory-Snape. Without any fear of the monster before him, Harry walked right up to the werewolf.

And then, he *poked* his finger into the beast's stomach before pulling it out again with an inky black fog trailing behind it.

"Sir?" he asked slowly. "Does this mean what I think it does?"

A heavy silence fell on the memory before Snape spoke again. And when he did speak, it was so low and quiet that Harry shuddered – just for a moment, Snape sounded *exactly* like Vernon Dursley had on Harry's last evening in the Dursley household right before the Muggle went mad and tried to kill him.

"That depends, *Potter*," he hissed. "Do you *think* it means that my recollection of nearly being mauled and eaten by a werewolf, a memory that is foundational to everything I am today, *is a FALSE MEMORY?!*"

"Sir ...?" Harry began.

"Get. Out."

Eyes wide, Harry nodded and withdrew from the memory, leaving the older man behind. Alone in a memory that he now knew to be a deception, Snape threw open all of his passive Legillimency senses to search every inch of the memory for the seams that connected truth and lie into a seamless whole. Then, he pulled out his wand and pointed it at the monster that had plagued his nightmares for almost two decades.

"**LEGILIMENS!**" he cried out. In response, a strange tremor passed over the frozen memory.

"**LEGILIMENS!**" he yelled out, even louder. The tremor advanced to a violent shaking, as if the tunnel were suffering an earthquake. A rumbling sound echoed all around. A large crack appeared in the wall next to him.

**"LEGILLIMENNNSSS!"** he screamed in utter fury, ignoring the tiny rivulet of blood that trickled out of his nose. A sound like cannon-fire erupted all around the enraged man, and more cracks appeared in the walls, the floors, the ceiling. The memory-images of Potter, Snape, and Lupin shuddered and then twisted and then *shattered*, along with the rest of the environment.

And then, the memory replayed.

**"SNAPE! FOR MERLIN'S SAKE, STOP!"**

*The Marauder was close behind, but not close enough. Snape grasped the handle of the door and pushed with all his might. The door flew open, and inside ....*

Inside ... was a werewolf. Grey fur. Sharp teeth. Yellow eyes. Huge claws. But if the beast was hungry, it's countenance did not show it. And there was no rage. Only a sudden shock at Snape's entrance. Indeed, the monster was just sitting placidly on its haunches in the middle of some kind of runic circle. And as it regarded the intruder, it tilted its head to one side more like a befuddled dog than a deadly lupine predator.

**"Sniv..lus?"** the werewolf growled in confusion.

It was only then, after Snape absorbed the impossibility of a werewolf calmly speaking his name, that he could tear his eyes away from the creature to take in the other figures in the room. There were about twelve wizards and witches in total, all of whom were staring at him in a mixture of surprise and consternation. Most of them, the boy did not recognize. Three of them he did. The first was Augustus Rookwood who had been his DADA instructor just a few years before. The second was Damocles Belby who a few



years hence would take him for a Potions Apprentice and train him to Mastery.

The third was *Albus Dumbledore*.

## Chapter End Notes

NEXT: PROJECT ROMULUS!

AN1: Thanks to all my wonderful editors at the POS Discord Server: Adam Sitrich, CuredentTepes, darkphoenix31, HeidiWolf, LadyOfTheLibrary, MichelRika, pizdets UTC+10, Pokeflute, Prince of Conspiracy, ProfessionalDragonslayer, and Team Frigg.

AN2: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P\*\*\*\*\*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN3 (What the Sinister Man is reading): "Gates of Azkaban" by mirrormarie (a sequel to "The Cactus and the Toad" by the same author) and "Wolf's Choice" by Lomonaaren (a sequel to "Other People's Choices")

AN4 (Stuff I stole shamelessly from other people): In the last chapter, the Fascination Fish was lifted from "Biting the Hand That Feeds You" by Andrew Joshua Talon, and the accusation of being a "livingist" is from

"Oh God Not Again!" by Sarah1281. In this chapter, Luna's story about the Kynoccephalus is a reference to "Stages of Hope" by kylie silverstorm (and there, it's also something Luna uses to get through to an emotionally drained Harry), while Horace Slughorn's "special candlelight suppers" are an homage to similar (and similarly dreaded) gatherings thrown by Hyacinth Bucket ("It's pronounced Bouquet!"). All of them, I highly recommend.

# What's Past Is Prologue (pt 1)

## Chapter Notes

### SHAMELESS PLUG!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

***Harry Potter  
and the Death Eater Menace***

***Harry Potter and all associate characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.***

## ***CHAPTER 35: What's Past Is Prologue (pt 1)***

### **THE PRESENT**

**The Hogwarts Infirmary**

**13 February 1994, 9:55 p.m.**

With a look of grave concern, Albus Dumbledore swept into the infirmary and took in the scene. His Potions Master was lying on a hospital bed, unconscious and with a trickle of

dried blood stretching out his left nostril and down the side of his face. Madam Pomfrey leaned over him while casting diagnostic Charms with her usual professionalism. Several feet away stood Harry Potter whose expression was also pensive despite the self-control the boy's Occlumency normally provided.

"What has happened here?" the Headmaster asked.

"I'm still doing diagnostics, Headmaster," said the matron without looking up. "Ask Mr. Potter."

Dumbledore looked at Harry expectantly. The boy moved closer to him and spoke quietly.

"I was ... investigating that matter regarding the Caretaker you wanted me to look into, and I learned of the incident involving Professor Snape and the Shrieking Shack from when he was a student." Albus's eyes widened as the boy continued. "I persuaded Professor Snape to let me see his actual memory of the incident but ... sir, that memory was *false*! I still don't know what happened at the Shrieking Shack, but I don't think it involved my father saving the Professor from a werewolf at all! Anyway, I showed my findings to the Professor, but then he told me to exit the memory. I did ... and then, about fifteen seconds later, Professor Snape came out screaming in pain with blood dripping down his nose before he collapsed. I contacted Madam Pomfrey through the Floo in his office and helped her bring him here. That was just a few minutes ago."

"Did ... did he say anything, Harry?" The boy shook his head. Then, the matron spoke up.

"It seems to be some sort of psychic damage, apparently self-inflicted. It's quite similar to the injury that put young Potter here in a coma for several days last term, though

thankfully not as severe. I believe he will recover, but he will likely be in a healing coma for some time. A day or two at least."

The Headmaster nodded gravely. "Thank you, Poppy. Mr. Potter, it's almost curfew. You'd best be off to bed. I will have a report on Professor Snape's condition delivered to your House in the morning through your prefects."

Accepting the dismissal, Harry nodded respectfully and left the infirmary. Dumbledore watched him as he left before turning back to Madam Pomfrey.

"Poppy, if there is any change, send word to me at once, no matter what the hour."

"As you wish, Headmaster."

Albus studied the face of the unconscious Snape, a face which looked so much more peaceful in sleep than it ever appeared when he was awake. Feeling the weight of his age, the old wizard made his way back to his office before sending his Patronus out with a message to deliver. Then, the Headmaster made his way to a hidden alcove containing a Pensieve. He took a few moments to place several highly relevant memories into the bowl before leaning forward to look inside. It was time to face his role in how Severus had come to this point.

For the Greater Good.

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## **THE PAST**

**10 March 1971**

**The Basement of the Lupin Residence**

With a soft groan, the boy awoke in his cage and sat up. Once fully awake, he gasped and looked around wildly before sighing loudly in relief. He was naked, starving, covered in painful scratches, and locked up all alone in a heavy and magically reinforced metal cage in a dark and dingy basement. All was right with the world.

After a few minutes spent catching his breath, the boy gingerly reached through the bars to grasp a chain hanging from a bell suspended from the ceiling. As he did, he winced in pain from the scratches, a sign of the Monster's displeasure. Virtually the only thing little Remus Lupin ever remembered from his time as the Monster was the knowledge of how much it hated him for not giving in. How much it wanted him to stop loving his mum and dad. How much it wanted him to *eat* his mum and dad instead.

But for some reason, the Monster couldn't make little Remus give in to its hungers and hatreds, so it took out its frustrations on their shared body instead. Every Change was accompanied by a night spent in a cage unable to hunt and kill and eat (and perhaps not even in that order), and at some point, the Monster inevitably accepted that, for another month at least, it would not win. And so, petulantly, it would begin to scratch and bite at its own arms and chest. The wounds healed quickly, for that was one of the Monster's gifts. Few things could hurt it for very long, and its own claws were not on the list. But it still hurt while it healed, and a few claw marks were so deep that they would not fully heal before the Change Back. When that happened, scars would remain. Not many, but enough for little Remus's body to be marked with them.

Remus rang the bell three times quickly, then three times slowly, and then three times fast once more. Intelligence was not one of the Monster's gifts, and so it could never

know how to send his mum and dad the all-clear signal. Even if it could trick them into coming down to the basement before the Change Back, it probably couldn't hurt them through the cage, but it was always better safe than sorry. Remus knew that his parents had sacrificed everything to give him some semblance of a childhood, and he would rather die than curse them as he'd been cursed.

A few moments after he rang the bell, he heard steps coming down the basement stairs, and the door was thrust open. It was Lyall Lupin, the boy's father. He looked down at his boy, naked and exhausted, and did his best to not seem sad. He never succeeded, for Remus was far too astute, but the boy appreciated the attempt. Lyall swiftly came over to unlock the cage with a spell, and Remus slowly crawled out and stood, wincing again as he did. His father summoned a terrycloth robe from across the room and wrapped it around his son.

"Good morning, Remus," he said with false cheer. "And happy birthday! I wish it hadn't coincided with the full moon, but ...." Lyall trailed off uncertainly. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," the boy lied, and his father nodded, cognizant of the lie but willing to pretend otherwise for all their sake's.

"Good, good. Now let's get you upstairs. We'll give you a rub down with some Essence of Dittany and then a nice hot bath while your Mum finishes cooking breakfast." Remus nodded.

"After that, I want you to take a nap for a while so you'll be rested." Lyall smiled cheerfully, but it did not reach his eyes. It rarely did nowadays.

Lyall paused and then continued with a slight hitch in his voice. "We have company coming later this afternoon, Remus. I want you to be on your best behavior when they get here."

"Is it ... *Them*?" Remus asked cautiously. Lyall winced and then nodded. "*Them*" was how the boy referred to the wizards who showed up from time to time on the days after each Change. Privately, he also thought of them as "The Faceless Men" even though he suspected some were women, because neither he nor his parents could ever remember their faces after they left. Remus didn't like to say that name aloud though. It was a scary name, and he didn't like to think about how frightening he found *Them*. The Faceless Men didn't come after every Change, and the tests they performed on Remus were quick and rarely hurt – though *rarely* was another way of saying *sometimes* – but they always made the boy feel uncomfortable. The way they looked at him, as if he were still an animal even after the Change Back.

*They* first made themselves known to Remus when he was 7. He'd been cursed at 4, but while his parents eventually told him that the Faceless Men had been monitoring him casually from a distance ever since he was first cursed, he had never met any of *Them*. Not until his 7th birthday, when *They* came to the isolated shack where the Lupins had set up a home and offered *The Deal*.

It turned out that the Faceless Men thought Remus Lupin was *special*. He hadn't felt *special*, and certainly not *special* simply because he had no desire to rip his parents and everyone else he met apart and eat all their flesh and suck on their marrow until he felt sated. He was horrified and sickened when one of *Them* asked about such feelings at their first session. But apparently, for someone



who'd been a werewolf for nearly three years by that point, the fact that Remus had not yet become a Monster was very special indeed.

The Deal was simple. The Lupins would move to a lovely cottage on the outskirts of a small village in Wales. Everyone would be made to think that they were respectable Muggles (Hope was a Muggle, and while Lyall was from an old French Pureblood family, he had been well-trained in Muggle culture as part of his prior Ministry position). Lyall would work as one of the town librarians, while the boy's mum would work part-time as a teacher. They could both use magic in the cottage, which would be shielded from the eyes of others with Notice-Me-Not Charms, but otherwise, the whole family would "go Muggle." Remus would attend the small village school with the other Muggle children and would say nothing about the wizarding world. On the nights of the full moon, Remus would be locked in a specially reinforced cage in the family's specially reinforced basement that was enchanted both to keep him contained and prevent any of the neighbors from hearing the terrible howls of the Monster.

And three or four times a year, the Faceless Men would come on the day after a Change and run their *tests*.

The Deal meant that despite his condition, Remus Lupin had a surprisingly decent childhood marred only by unpleasant but only rarely *painful* tests and the terrible certainty that his parents were secretly miserable and it was all his fault. Hope and Lyall both pretended admirably but ineffectually. Remus had never become one with the Monster, but he was still a werewolf, and a werewolf *could tell*.

The arrangement had not been perfect, but surprisingly, the biggest problem had not been Remus's lycanthropy but rather his wizardry. Like nearly all young wizards-to-be, Remus was prone to accidental magic when he was upset. Unlike nearly all young wizards-to-be, however, Remus lived among Muggles who could not understand why so many strange events surrounded the odd Lupin child who was always so sickly at roughly the same time every month. But they could figure out that he was the epicenter, and Muggles were as prone to rumor and fear-mongering as any wizard. Four times, the family had needed relocation to a new village while their former neighbors were Obliviated of all knowledge about them.

After his nap, Remus and his parents had a light lunch followed by a delicious birthday cake that Hope had decorated beautifully. Remus blew out the candles and made his wish. It was the same wish he'd made every year since he was four years old – that he could be a normal boy. And while that seemed as unlikely as ever, he was a little boy who knew about magic and whose mother's name was Hope.

Around 2 o'clock, there was a knock at the door. Lyall answered and admitted four people. Three of them wore the same preternaturally bland robes he'd come to expect from *Them*, and as usual, his eyes seemed to slide off their faces without retaining the image of them. But to his surprise, the other man who had come for his birthday was the very opposite of nondescript. He was easily the oldest man Remus had ever seen, with silver-grey hair and a beard that came down to his waist. His robes were made of a vivid purple cloth embroidered with indigo paisleys, and a matching tasseled hat sat on his head. Most interesting of all, however, was the reaction of Remus's parents, who exhibited their customary nervousness around the three

anonymous wizards (or witches? Remus could never tell) but who treated the old man with complete admiration.

After saying hello to Lyall and Hope, the old man stepped forward and bowed respectfully to Remus.

"And you must be the Birthday Boy himself!" the old man said with twinkling eyes. "Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. And – conditional on some terms that your parents will have to agree to – I am pleased to present you with a very special birthday gift indeed – a personal invitation to attend Hogwarts during the coming term."

And so, Remus Lupin's birthday wish came true ... sort of.

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## ***THE PRESENT***

### ***A Hogwarts Corridor***

The Caretaker strolled through the halls of Hogwarts, whistling as he walked, with Crookshanks following at his feet. It had been a busy night. He'd broken up no less than four broom closet assignments and one intra-house poker game (apparently one of the younger Slytherins had introduced the Muggle game to some friends and it had caught on). Not for the first time, he wished that he could find the old Map he and his friends had fashioned so many years before, or that he could reproduce it alone without the aid of the other three. While perhaps an invasion of students privacy, it would save him time climbing every stair case in the castle in search of oversexed teenagers.

*"Why does this school have so many broom closets anyway?" he thought idly to himself. "House elves do all the cleaning and they don't need brooms. Did the Founders put*

*multiple broom closets on every floor  
to encourage underage snogging?!"*

Of course, Remus had been searching for the Marauder's Map for reasons far more important than simply catching students out of bounds. But after all these months, he now assumed the Marauder's Map and the secrets it contained were lost forever. Those thoughts were instantly derailed, however, by the arrival of a brilliant silvery phoenix Patronus.

"Please come to my office as soon as you've completed your rounds. There has been ... a development."

The Caretaker frowned. Mindful of the fact that "*a development*" was almost certainly a euphemism for "*something dreadful*," he completed his circuit as quickly as possible and then went swiftly to the Headmaster's office. He slipped past the gargoyle and bounded up the stairs, but the Headmaster called out before he could knock.

"Come in, Remus."

Lupin stepped inside. By that point, Albus had finished his review of his old memories and was back in his chair. Fawkes was perched on the back of the chair crooning softly. Remus blanched at the expression on the old man's face.

"Did ... did somebody die?"

"No," Albus said with a weak smile. "Well, not yet, anyway. Although violence may well be forthcoming from a certain quarter." He sighed deeply. "Severus knows that his memories of the Shrieking Shack have been altered."

Remus's eyes widened in surprise as the Headmaster continued.

"That is why I have summoned you, Remus. To decide what we are going to do next."

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## **THE PAST**

**1 September 1971**

**Platform 9 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>**

The night before had been a new moon, which meant the Monster was as dormant as it could be, but Remus still had remarkably acute senses. Growing up in a succession of small Welsh villages, the boy was not used to the sounds, the smells, and the crush of people he encountered on Platform 9 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>. Lyall patted his shoulder reassuringly, and Hope gave him a tight hug.

"You'll be fine, Remus," she said. "You're clever and a good student. This is such an opportunity for you, one we never imagined you'd have. So, trust in Dumbledore and whatever happens," her voice broke, "be brave."

"I will, Mum. I promise." He gave a last hug to his father and then headed for the Hogwarts Express. Along the way, his heightened sense of hearing picked up on snippets of conversation along the way.

*"I hope I don't have to remind you of how important it is for you to make Slytherin, boy,"* said a thin man with cruel features to a boy Remus's age with long curly black hair. *"I would merely be disappointed in you. Your mother, on the other hand...."*

*"Come on, Sev!"* urged a girl with brilliant red hair, clearly a Muggleborn according to her attire. *"I want to get a good*

*seat!"*

*"It's a train, Lily," said the pale boy bearing a long-suffering expression who she was dragging by the hand. "All the seats are exactly the same."*

*"But Daaaad!" whined a boy with messy hair, wire-rimmed glasses, and expensive robes. "I bet all the other Firsties will have brooms! Surely no one follows a rule that stupid!"*

*"Now you listen to me, Peter," said a pale stern witch in a wicker wheel chair to a plump boy with an unfortunate haircut. "I want you to do the best you can. But we both know that your magic is weak, and if you can't manage the course work, well, there's no shame in being a squib. If you can't handle it, or you get picked on by all those mean boys, or you just get homesick and miss your Mumsy, you just send me an owl and I'll have you home in a jiffy. Do you understand?"*

*"Yes, Mother," the boy said in a flat voice. "I understand."*

*The pale witch had a sudden coughing fit and covered her mouth with a laced handkerchief. "Of course, if my malady grows worse, you might have to come home no matter how you're doing, if only for the funeral."*

*The plump boy closed his eyes. "Please don't say that, Mother."*

*"Yes, yes. How rude of me to complain about my own weakness on your special day. Think nothing of it. Now, come give Mumsy a kiss goodbye."*

*Soon, Remus was sitting alone in a compartment near the back of the train. He'd just gotten settled when there was a*

knock on the door. It was the heavysset boy with the sickly mother.

"Excuse me, do you mind?" he said. "Everywhere else is full."

"No," Remus replied. "Not at all."

The boy sat across from Remus. "I'm Peter, by the way. Peter Pettigrew."

"I'm Remus. Remus Lupin."

Peter smiled warmly. "Are you really? What an interesting name. Much better than mine."

"What's wrong with *Peter Pettigrew*?"

"Too alliterative. And Pettigrew sounds like a brand name for women's undergarments."

Remus laughed at the quip even as he blushed slightly. "So, where are you from, Peter?"

"Upper Appleby." He noticed the lack of recognition on the other boy's face. "It's a wizarding community hidden inside a Muggle village in Lincolnshire. You?"

"Most recently, Eglwyswrw. It's in Pembrokeshire in Wales."

Peter blinked. "Egg-loose-you-row?"

"Eh, close enough for Welsh. I was actually born in England. We didn't move to Wales until I was older."

The two boys continued talking amiably for several minutes about their upbringings (or edited accounts thereof). Remus said that his parents were a Pureblood wizard and a

Muggle and that his dad actually "went Muggle" a few years earlier. The thought of that clearly astounded Peter. Like Remus, Peter was an only child raised by his mother. His father was the late Martin Pettigrew, whose family had immigrated as refugees after the Grindelwald War and who had died when Peter was 2, leaving him a half-orphan. His mother was Edwina Pettigrew, nee Gamp, an Ancient and Noble family that had fallen on hard times. Edwina had enough money in her dowry to cover her and Peter's living expenses and pay for Hogwarts, but money was tight. Remus sympathized.

"I ... saw you with her out on the platform," Remus said cautiously. "Is she very sick?"

Peter looked away. "I ... I'd rather not talk about that, if it's all the same."

Remus nodded and changed the subject. The two were engrossed in a discussion about what Houses they would likely be in (Remus hoped for Ravenclaw, Peter for Hufflepuff), when the door was thrust open, and two other boys practically fell into the room, loudly talking to one another.

"Can you believe that!" said the one with glasses and messy hair. "I mean seriously, can you believe that that greasy beak-nosed little pissant would say something like that to my face!"

The other boy snickered. "I do everything seriously!"

The first boy paused and looked at him in confusion. "What?"

"Well ... my name's Sirius so I do everything seriously. Get it?" He laughed at his own joke while his friend just shook



his head. Remus coughed loudly, and the two rounded on him in surprise as if only now noticing the room was occupied.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't see you there. James Potter, Heir to the Ancient and Noble House of Potter. And you are?"

"Remus Lupin." "Peter Pettigrew."

James thought for a moment. "I don't think I know those families."

"Is it a problem if you don't?" said Remus cautiously.

"Not a bit!" said Sirius as he dropped into a seat. "What a boring world it would be if you only ever talked to people you knew. Or worse, people you're related to! By the way, I'm Sirius Black of the Decrepit and Sucky House of Black. Pleased to meet you both."

Then, he turned to his friend. "Say, you're not gonna turn into a Pureblood ponce when we get to Hogwarts, are you *Heir Potter*?"

James snorted and turned to Remus and Peter. "Sorry, sorry. I'll try not to be so pompous. It'll be a struggle because I'm perfect in every way, but I'll do what I can." He held his nose up before bursting into laughter. After a few seconds, the other three boys joined in.

There was another knock on the door. "Anything off the trolley, dears?"

James looked around the compartment at his three companions and decided that he was feeling magnanimous. He turned to the Trolley Lady with a grin.

"We'll take the lot!"

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***THE PRESENT***  
***Dumbledore's Office***

"So," Remus said cautiously. "What *do* you want to tell him?"

"About what happened in 1976?" Albus responded. "The truth. Which I should have done years ago. And would have, but for shame."

Remus shook his head. "You have nothing to be ashamed of Albus. None of that was your fault."

"I was Headmaster then as I am now," Albus answered. "I had ... a duty of care."

The werewolf did not respond to that. Instead, he moved on to more pressing matters.

"So ... what will you tell him about ... more recent events?"

"By which you mean, will I tell him about your presence in the castle? About your identity as Malachi Sturgeon?"

"And more importantly, about what potion he's been making since last September and who's been drinking it."

"Ah," the older man nodded. "I take it you wish to preserve that secret a while longer."

Remus looked pensive. "I will admit ... I've struggled for over a decade in Shamballa to maintain some sort of ... accommodation for my condition. Some degree of ... peace. And yet, not all those years of meditation and study has

allowed me as much freedom from my curse as Belby's potion."

"Damocles Belby is deceased, Remus. It is to Severus Snape that you should feel gratitude for that freedom."

Remus fought down the urge to scoff. "It is difficult to feel gratitude for someone's help when they don't *know* they're helping you *and* they almost certainly *would not* help you if they knew who you were."

"I cannot believe that Severus would continue to hold a grudge against you if he knew the truth, Remus,"  
Dumbledore chided.

"Perhaps, Albus. But it is *my life* that will be affected if he *does* hold such a grudge. And worse, it is the entire Wizarding world that will be endangered if your faith in him is misplaced. Forgive me if I am not as magnanimous towards a former Death Eater as you are."

The two men stayed up past midnight weighing their options while high on a shelf above them, the Hat watched intently but said nothing.

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## ***THE PAST***

### ***The 1971 Sorting Ceremony***

The Sortings went quickly after a slow start. Black came closest to becoming a hat stall before the word "*GRYFFINDOR!*" bellowed forth from the Hat to the shock of everyone in the Great Hall. The ebon-haired boy strolled over to the Gryffindor table with an easy grin on his face and immediately made friends with Fabian and Gideon Prewett.

Lily Evans joined him soon after. While she tried not to let it show, she seemed slightly disappointed. Apparently, she and her best friend ("Sev") had both wanted to go to Ravenclaw together. When she saw the boy standing by the door, she waved at him nervously, but all Snape could do was stare at her in dismay. Moments later, Lupin and Pettigrew were sitting together just a few seats down from Lily and Sirius, both looking pensive. Lupin had literally never been around so many excitable children at once, and he was on edge. For Peter, on the other hand, it was the Hat's words that haunted him.

"You can be *great*, Mr. Pettigrew," it had said. "I know your mother has filled your head with nonsense about your weaknesses. But *you can be great*." Then, it paused. "But please ... don't forget to also be *good*," it finished softly before bellowing out "GRYFFINDOR" once more.

The Hat called out "GRYFFINDOR" for James Potter before McGonagall could actually fit it down all the way onto his head.

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The first full moon came two weeks later. Word that Remus's mother had been injured back home was delivered at the evening meal. It was a lie, of course. A pre-arranged excuse that gave the werewolf a chance to "go home for a day or so." It would be some time before his friends realized that Remus either got sick or went home like clockwork every month in a lunar cycle.

Madam Pomfrey escorted the boy out the back of the building towards the Whomping Willow that had been planted a few months earlier and then grown at a magically accelerated rate. She pointed her wand at a particular knot near the base and struck it with a Stinging Hex.

Immediately, the ordinarily violent and dangerous plant stilled, and a small opening appeared at the base. Hurrying, the mediwitch led the boy through the opening and down the long passage that ended in a heavy door. She pushed it open without knocking. Remus grimaced at her urgency. The matron was always kind and had tried to be as reassuring as possible, but he could tell how nervous she was just to be near him on this night at least.

"No," he thought. "*Not nervous. Terrified.*"

Beyond the heavy door was a large room full of all sorts of odd things. A circle of glowing runes dominated the center of the floor. Floating above were several levitating brass orbs with glass eyes. These, Remus learned, were recording devices for posterity's sake. Some distance away from the circle were various tables set up as stations. A few were full of beakers, tubes, and potion cauldrons. Another that immediately drew Remus's attention was one which had an over-sized crossbow physically mounted onto it like a ballista. And in it was an enormous bolt that looked to be made of silver. As far as Remus knew, the vulnerability of werewolves to silver was just an old wives' tale, but apparently, the Unspeakables would be testing *everything* about his condition.

The boy glanced behind him as Madam Pomfrey swiftly closed the door behind her on her way out without even a backwards glance.

"I'd have thought it would be locked and bolted to keep people out," he said idly.

"A safety procedure, my boy," said Albus Dumbledore as he came in from another room with three other men. "Should the warding circle we've set up fail and you break free in

your lupine state, it will be necessary to evacuate the Shrieking Shack. We'll be keeping that door unlocked in case it's necessary for some of us to run out of it very, very quickly."

"The ... Shrieking ... Shack?" Remus said uncertainly.

"The building in which you find yourself, young man," said one of the Headmaster's companions. "I suppose some introductions are in order. My name is Damocles Belby, Master of Potions. This young man next to me is Saul Croaker, the newly appointed Voice of the Unspeakables. And the terrifying codger beside him is Augustus Rookwood, who has deigned to use his real name while working on this project with us, while the other Unspeakables hide behind their usual anonymity."

Both the Unspeakables rolled their eyes at Belby's introduction as the Potions Master continued.

"But to return to your question, the Shrieking Shack is an abandoned home on the outskirts of Hogsmeade. With the aid of some intriguing magics that Rookwood rudely refuses to share with me, the building is protected from outside inquiry by a magical field that causes everyone who sees it to identify it as '*The Shrieking Shack*,' the most haunted building in Britain, a site far too dangerous to enter. More importantly, it has held this status retroactively since long before any of the current inhabitants of Hogsmeade were born. Our hope that such a deception will shield us from discovery and hide our activities from the overly curious. Similarly, the Whomping Willow that guards the entryway to the tunnel leading here is enchanted so that your fellow students believe that the tree has been there for years and years instead of quietly planted one night last month just after the tunnel was completed."

He turned to Rookwood and Croaker.

"You do realize, I'm not going to stop until I've figured out that spell, gentlemen."

"Curiosity killed the cat, Belby," said Rookwood in a cool voice.

"Ah Gus. As if your own sense of curiosity isn't just as likely to be the death of *you* someday."

"Gentlemen," interrupted Dumbledore. "We are off topic and wasting time. I would much rather for all our sake's that young Mr. Lupin be *inside* that runic circle we've been working on *before* his transformation."

He turned to Remus. "Mr. Lupin, you do fully understand what is going to happen next, correct?" he asked gently.

Remus swallowed and nodded. He would step into the circle, take off his clothes, and wait for the Change. Then, once the Monster had taken over, the researchers here would perform various tests. To see how better to contain werewolves. To see how better to detect werewolves. To see how better to *hurt* werewolves. And hopefully, someday, to see how to *cure* werewolves.

The boy bit his lower lip and then moved towards the circle. He was scared, but the Hat had put him in Gryffindor. It was time to show the world why.

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## **THE PRESENT**

**14 February 1994**

**The Foyer Outside the Great Hall**

Jim was on his way to breakfast in the Great Hall when he stopped suddenly, his eyes lighting up in surprise and delight. He ran forward into the waiting arms of one of his favorite people: Peter Pettigrew.

"You came!" he said excitedly. "I never heard back from the owl I sent."

Peter laughed as he hugged his godson affectionately. "Well, that poor school owl had a longer trip than you expected. I was actually away on business in Eastern Europe. But when I got the message, I came as soon as I could arrange a portkey. And now, here I am."

"So you are, Mr. Pettigrew," said a familiar voice. It was Minerva McGonagall, who was bemused by the solicitor's presence. While she'd had a fondness for the Marauders during their school days despite their frequent tomfoolery, she remembered Pettigrew as being, sadly, the least of them. It had been something of a surprise to see the heights to which that shy young boy had risen, even with Lord Potter's patronage.

"And to what do we owe the pleasure of House Potter's Seneschal?" she continued. "Usually, we don't even permit parents to visit without an advance warning."

Peter blushed slightly at being chastised by his old Head of House. "Well, I *was* going to present myself to the Headmaster before speaking to Jim here, but since you're here ...."

"Say no more, Mr. Pettigrew. If Mr. Potter wishes to grab a quick breakfast and then meet with you before his lessons start, that will be quite alright. As it happens, I believe you have Potions first this morning, yes?" The boy nodded with a grimace at the thought. "Well then, you should have all the



time you need to meet together. An announcement will be made at breakfast, but Professor Snape ... has taken ill, and his classes for today are cancelled."

Jim's eyes lit up at the thought of a morning without Potions. He'd endeavored to do better in the Slytherin's class after his attempted apology earlier in the school year, but the intricacies of potion-making still eluded him. With McGonagall's consent, Peter followed Jim into the Great Hall to grab a quick bite. It was early yet, and the room was nearly empty. Peter paused at the doorway and inhaled deeply of the heady aroma of fresh-cooked breakfast seasoned with nostalgia. Despite himself, he smiled in remembrance.

It was provident that Peter had returned to Hogwarts at this moment, for by odd coincidence, it had been this very day in February some twenty years earlier that the Marauders became more than just a quartet of juvenile delinquent pranksters.

Indeed, it was the day *everything* changed.

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## ***THE PAST***

### ***14 February 1974***

By his 3rd year, Remus and his fellow "Marauders" (as Sirius had christened the quartet) had become quite close. Of course, they weren't *equally* close, at least not yet – James and Sirius were all but brothers, while Remus and Peter often commiserated on how they were the third and fourth wheels, respectively. It helped that Peter and Remus spent so much time together in the Library. Pettigrew had blossomed under the mentorship of their DADA instructor and had become much more attentive to his studies. Remus,

meanwhile, had somehow acquired the reputation of being "the Brains" of the group. He doubted that was the case. Lupin was the most "*academically inclined*" to be sure, but that was because merely being able to attend Hogwarts at all was such an unexpected miracle that he was obsessed with doing as well as possible to justify the Headmaster's faith in him. Sirius and James, on the other hand, were both so naturally gifted at wand magic that they'd be able to take turns as first in their year (or second, Remus supposed, behind the unstoppable machine that was Lily Evans) if only they applied themselves. But while Black and Potter shone brightly in Charms and Transfiguration, they were almost obstinate in their refusal to study in those classes they found boring.

But despite his scholastic and social success, Remus was still bothered that he had to lie to his closest friends about his monthly absences. The excuse of a "family emergency" had worn thin before the end of his first term at Hogwarts, and so with Madam Pomfrey's assistance, he came up with a clever alternative that had the benefit of being grounded in reality. He revealed to the other three Marauders "the truth": that as a child he'd had "an encounter" with a werewolf. He wasn't bitten, but the encounter caused him to suffer from chronic wolf-fear. Madam Pomfrey helpfully explained to the boys that Remus's specific manifestation of wolf-fear as linked to the lunar cycle and caused him to have terrible and violent nightmares on the night of the full moon. Accordingly, he spent those nights in the Infirmary to avoid disturbing his dorm-mates and also in case he injured himself in the throes of a particularly bad nightmare. The other boys accepted that ... mostly. James and Sirius peppered him for weeks about what his encounter with Fenrir Greyback was like, but Remus was able to put them off by saying it was too traumatic to think about. Peter

asked no questions but gave him some odd looks from time to time.

Still, that lie seemed to put his friends at ease ... until the middle of his Third Year.

In retrospect, Remus should have known that something was up, as his three friends began acting strangely around him after returning from the Christmas holidays. Foolishly, he ignored his instincts and paid the price. Just before dusk, Madam Pomfrey escorted the boy to the Shrieking Shack, before returning quickly back down the passageway as she had a few sick students staying overnight in the Infirmary. Neither she nor anyone else noticed that the door was slow to close behind her.

Within moments, Remus was stripped down inside the protective circle. While the Headmaster and Professor Rookwood were reviewing the work of the junior researchers, Master Belby approached with a bubbling goblet.

"Here you go, lad," said the potioneer. "I've added some spearmint and valerian. That should improve the taste and reduce nausea a bit. Or at least I hope it does."

"Thank you, sir," Remus said quietly as he took the goblet and downed it as quickly as he could without gagging on the foul mixture. He handed the goblet back and wiped his mouth. Then, his acute sense of hearing picked up two unexpected sounds – whispers from across the room near the door. Voices he found familiar

*"What is this place...?" "Shhh! They'll hear...!"*

Remus's eyes narrowed. "James? Sirius? Is that y-URRRK?!"

The boy's question was interrupted by sudden crack of his jaw dislocating before stretching out into a muzzle. He fell to the ground howling in agony as the Change began. And in response, three boys hidden under an Invisibility Cloak screamed in terror.

Dumbledore, who had been distracted by the onset of Remus's transformation, looked over to the door leading to the tunnel in surprise. It opened partway, but a flick of his wand caused it to slam shut again. He focused his mind and extended his Legilimency on all levels before striding over towards the wall and reaching out with his hand. When he felt the touch of a silky yet invisible fabric, he grasped it and yanked. The Invisibility Cloak was ripped away to reveal the terrified faces of Sirius Black, James Potter, and Peter Pettigrew.

It was not immediately clear who terrified them more: the partially-transformed werewolf presently writhing on the ground in agony or the furious Headmaster looming over them.

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## ***THE PRESENT***

### ***Hogwarts***

Breakfast in the Great Hall had only deepened Peter's sense of nostalgia, and he took the opportunity share some tales of his days with the Marauders. Fred Weasley had been astonished to learn that Jim's father had been the mysterious Prongs while Peter had been Wormtail. He was evasive on how he knew their former identities (Peter suspected that Jim had blabbed), but it was clear he was a prankster himself and had idolized Messrs. Prongs, Wormtail, Moony, and Padfoot without even knowing who they really were. Peter regaled the Gryffindors in Jim's

social circle with tales of pranks and jokes from his school days. But he also could not help but pick up on several obvious social cues, such as the fact that Fred Weasley and his twin brother were apparently not on speaking terms. Or more interestingly, the fact that the Granger girl and the Longbottom Heir could not hide their concern over his presence.

Those two were sitting at the edge of Jim's social group, not participating in the conversation but clearly hanging on every word. Peter knew by that point that Hermione Granger and Neville Longbottom were closer to Harry Potter than to the Boy-Who-Lived despite their house affiliations, so he assumed that Harry had poisoned their minds against him, a fact that he found more amusing than troubling. He glanced over at the Slytherin table on the far side of the room and noticed that Harry and his Slytherin friends were ignoring him completely. But since his own school days, Peter had gained an understanding of Slytherin ways, and he realized that their efforts to ignore him were actually meant to disguise their intense interest in his presence.

After breakfast, Peter and Jim retired to a small sitting room near the entrance to the dungeons, the same room where the two had met during Jim's second year to discuss Jim's discovery with the Death Eater training manual Peter had given him. As before, there were no portraits in the room, and Peter quickly spelled it against eavesdroppers.

"Okay, sport," he finally said. "You called for me, and I'm here. I know from the tone of your letter that you think something terrible has happened. What's the story?"

Jim told him. How at some point in the recent past, most likely during the Potter New Year's Eve gala, someone had

placed him under the Imperius Curse. How at least some of his recent memories had been erased or altered. How he had been compelled him to have an instinctive distrust for his twin brother. Peter could not conceal his shock at the news. More than shocked, though, he was visibly angry at the violation of his godson's mind. He pulled Jim into a tight hug.

"I can hardly imagine how you must feel right now to know that something so ... heinous has been done to you, sport," he said with complete sincerity. "But I promise you. Whoever is responsible will pay for what they've done!"

Jim smiled at the intensity of Peter's words, but he did not look up at his godfather's face and so missed the cold and merciless expression it held. He would use this information, he knew. Use it however he could to facilitate his own plans and those of his master. But he *would also* see to it that the one responsible would indeed pay. The only person who could have been responsible.

*"James Charlus Potter," he thought. "You stupid, self-righteous fool. You haven't grown up one bit since we were kids, have you. Putting your own son under the Imperius, no doubt for 'the Greater Good' - how perfectly Gryffindor of you. I guess this means Contingency Plan G is back as an option."*

Peter pushed aside his anger at James and his embryonic plans for getting rid of the man and his wife so that Peter could become Jim's guardian outright. There would be time for that later. Instead, he talked some more with his godson about his feelings and tried to give him comfort and encouragement. And after fifteen minutes of that, he finally decided to change the subject.

"So, since I'm at Hogwarts anyway," he said amiably, "tell me more about this Animagery instructor."

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## ***THE PAST***

### ***The Shrieking Shack, moments after the intruders were discovered...***

The three boys were quickly hustled into a small side room and seated roughly around a table. Standing over them in varying degrees of anger were Dumbledore, Rookwood, Belby, and Croaker, although the boys didn't know who the latter two were. Before anyone spoke, Professor Rookwood grabbed each boy in turn by the chin and gazed into their eyes for several seconds.

"No signs of wolf-fear," he said to Dumbledore. "The ward held completely." He snorted. "A pity, really. Wolf-fear is a facet of lycanthropy that interests me but which we have had no opportunity to study as part of this project. It would have been poetic if these hooligans had *graciously volunteered* for such research.

Dumbledore glowered at the Unspeakable before turning to his students, with his attention focused on the likely ringleader.

"I believe some explanations are in order, Mr. Potter," said Dumbledore firmly. "How did you come to be here?"

James gulped. "Well, um, we wanted to know what Remus was doing every month. We figured out that he wasn't really staying in the Infirmary on the nights of the full moon like he said, and we wanted to know the truth."

"And how did you '*figure it out*'?" asked Croaker. "More importantly, exactly how long ago?"

James looked over at Sirius nervously, and the boy grimaced.

"Since October," Black said. "I, um, needed to borrow Remus's notes for a Potions essay and forgot to get them before he left the dorm, so I snuck down to the Infirmary in time to see Madam Pomfrey escorting him away. I followed for a bit but didn't want Filch to catch me, so I went back to the dorms and told James."

He looked up to Dumbledore with his eyes open. "Sir? How can Remus be a werewolf? I mean ... we've been sharing a dorm for 2 ½ years and he hasn't tried to eat us once!"

"I believe that we are the ones asking the questions, Mr. Black," Rookwood said coldly. Then, his eyes narrowed. "Did you discuss this matter often after your ... discovery? And with anyone else?"

"We never told anyone else," said Peter quietly. "We talked off and on for weeks. Then, James said that over the Christmas Break, he'd talk his father into letting him borrow an invisibility cloak so we could follow and see where Remus was going."

"An invisibility cloak that Mr. Potter should *know* is against school rules," said Dumbledore.

"Dad said our family cloak was an exception to the rules," Potter said defiantly before he remembered to whom he was speaking and swallowed nervously. "It's a hair-loom," he added.

"*Heirloom, dummy!*" Sirius hissed in annoyance.

"Regardless of your cloak's provenance, Mr. Potter," Dumbledore continued. "I will be confiscating it tonight and



speaking to your father about it first thing in the morning."

"Now hold on, Albus," said Unspeakable Croaker. "There are already three impudent brats who now know about this highly classified DOM project. The last thing we need is for you to involve the Lord of an Ancient and Noble House. I say we just Obliviate the boys, send them back to bed, and forget the whole thing happened."

"ABSOLUTELY NOT!" the Headmaster said affronted. "Young Mr. Lupin is a volunteer for Project Romulus, and even still, I am troubled by the pain he suffers, though I console myself that his suffering will hopefully be for a Greater Good!"

As if to punctuate Dumbledore's words, a howl of pure agony could be heard from the main room. The three boys jumped in fright while most of the adults in the room winced in response.

*"I guess this means we can take spearmint out of the formula,"* Belby muttered under his breath.

"But," Dumbledore continued in a calmer voice, "these three boys *did not* volunteer for anything of the sort, and *you will not* Obliviate them or do anything else to harm them in any way."

Calmer voice or no, there was no mistaking the threat in the old man's voice. Meanwhile, Rookwood had been studying the three boys with a contemplative gaze.

"Now see here, Albus," Croaker began, but Rookwood cut him off.

"Saul, Albus is right. Setting aside the ethical concerns," and from his tone, Professor Rookwood was not terribly

concerned with *ethical concerns*, "it seems clear that our young intruders have memories of being suspicious about the Subject going back several months. Completely eliminating any such memories would require fairly invasive psychic surgery and require several days to complete."

He looked over to Dumbledore and gave a cold smile. "And that assumes I could work uninterrupted without dear Albus here hexing me to hell and back due to his sudden attack of scruples. We should try an alternative approach."

Albus said nothing but simply returned the Unspeakable's gaze. Meanwhile, Belby pinched his brow between his fingers in annoyance.

"What sort of *alternative approach*, Augustus?"

"Why, *disclosure*, of course." Rookwood turned back to the boys. "You asked if Remus Lupin was a werewolf, Mr. Black. The answer is *yes*. But, he's not just any werewolf. He is the most singularly unique and important werewolf in the world. You see, for reasons which still elude us, Mr. Lupin is immune to the gradual psychological degradation associated with lycanthropy. Despite the terrible curse he bears, he remains as sane and as ... *human* as any of you. He has suffered this condition since the age of four, with agonizing changes and confinement during every full moon. Forced to move regularly lest he be discovered. Never able to develop true friendships. So tell me, gentlemen – *are you friends* of Remus Lupin?"

"Yes," said Peter instantly and emphatically. The other two boys agreed after barely a second of hesitation.

"Good," the Unspeakable continued in a silky voice, "I'm glad to hear he has such boon companions. So ... next question: Do any of you know what an Animagus is?"

The three boys looked at him in confusion but also excitement. Meantime, Albus's head jerked in surprise. "Augustus! What *exactly* are you proposing?!"

"Just looking into alternative avenues of research," the Professor said without taking his eyes off the boys. "We know that all Animagi have a natural immunity to lycanthropy and can even exercise some degree of control over them in their transformed shape. But we know nothing about the mechanisms underlying this characteristic. I propose the following: These boys want to help their friend. So let us put them to good use. We shall teach them to become Animagi and in the process monitor the reactions of Lupin to them at each stage of the process."

"What?!" Dumbledore exclaimed in amazement.

Belby was similarly troubled. "I admit it's a subject of potential interest, Gus, but surely you don't think that a trio of 13-year-old boys are viable candidates for Animagery, do you? It took Minerva five years and that was after she'd already obtained a Transfiguration Mastery."

"Oh, that wouldn't be a problem, Damocles," said Croaker. "The Unspeakables have access to advanced techniques. Our personal record for training an Animagus to mastery is four months, although she was an exceptional case. I know Gus himself never bothered to master the art - too afraid it would muck up his higher-order Occlumency skills. But we have several Animagi on staff, and I have no doubt we can teach these boys in a year or two. And I agree that the Lycanthropy-Animagus connection is probably something that we've probably not paid enough attention to. After all, Emeric did derive the curse from his own experiences as a natural animagus. It might indeed be the key to finding a cure."

He then rubbed his chin as he considered the boys more seriously. "But still, the risk is great. I am hesitant to entrust the secrecy of Project Romulus to three troublesome Gryffindor school boys."

"True," Rookwood said easily. "But we have other means of protecting our secrets. Surely, Albus, you would not object to some minor and *consensual* memory alterations, would you?"

"... go on," the Headmaster said in a quiet but intense voice.

"I suggest the following. If the boys will consent, I will impose a voluntary Memory Lock on them. They will remember discovering that Remus Lupin is a werewolf, but also that unlike other werewolves, he only suffers from lunar transformations and not the other attendant psychological disorders. They will retain their feelings of friendship with the boy and '*independently*' decide to become Animagi. On the nights of the full moon, they will follow Lupin here under cover of Potter's Invisibility Cloak. While Lupin is being monitored, the boys will receive instruction in Animagery. When it's time for them to leave, I'll lock their memories and they will believe they were in a hidden room in the castle practicing those techniques which they will believe that they acquired on their own initiative. As they develop in their Animagery, we can monitor how Lupin responds to them. All perfectly safe and controlled."

"You cannot possibly believe all that will work, Augustus!" Belby exclaimed.

"Oh, I've no doubt Gus can pull it off," Croaker said thoughtfully. "He is our resident expert on the psychic arts."

"Indeed," said Albus with a tight voice. "Though I must confess, what Augustus proposes sounds less like a Memory Lock and more like a *Confundus*, if you truly want to influence the boys to that extent. A Confundus ... or something worse."

Rookwood laughed. "Are you worried that I'll *Imperius* your Gryffindor golden boys, Albus? I'll be more than happy to let you oversee my memory programming to ensure nothing happens that offends your squeamishness."

Dumbledore's eyes glinted angrily. "Kindly do not mistake ethics for *squeamishness*, Rookwood. Your inability to tell the difference between the two was of great concern to me even during your school days."

The other man snorted. "Yes, that and my *associations*, as I recall."

"There is another issue to consider," Belby interrupted. "Namely, is it wise or proper to get these boys landed on the Conscription List so young?"

"No, that's not a problem," said Croaker with a shake of his head. "The Unspeakables have access to a classified version of the Conscription List. No one in the Ministry will know about them," he paused to glare at the boys, "well, at least as long as they show *a modicum of discretion*. If they're found out after leaving Hogwarts, they might be conscripted into Ministry work depending on their forms, but they will not face any criminal penalties for not registering."

Dumbledore still looked doubtful when Potter spoke up.

"Sir ... I *want* to do this. Peter's right. Remus is our friend, and if becoming Animagi will help him, then I want to try.

I'm a Potter, and my Dad raised me to always do what it right instead of what's easy, and to always strive for the Greater Good."

Peter and Sirius both nodded vigorously in agreement, while Dumbledore hesitated in visible anguish before assenting.

But already, he was growing to detest the expression "For the Greater Good."

## Chapter End Notes

Next: The Prank!

AN1: SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT: There is good news and bad news. The good news is that chapter 120 is nearly complete as I worked on 119 and 120 simultaneously. I expect to have the next chapter up by the end of next week. The bad news is that the subsequent chapters will not appear before Jan 1. This is for 2 reasons. First, I have decided to use NaMoWriMo as an opportunity to get Strangers In Dallas, the sequel to Strangers In Boston done. Or at the very least, well begun. Second, believe it or not, we are rather near the end of Year 3, about 6-7 more chapters, I think. However, because of the nature of several of those chapters, I need to have them all done before I start publishing them. I can't explain why without spoilers. You'll understand, I hope, when they appear. So, expect Chapter 121 on January 1st. On the bright side, the rest of DEM should follow very quickly thereafter.

Discord followers will still get access to advance previews of 121 and subsequent chapters with the understanding that some of the published "chunks" as I

like to call them may not be in the write order when previewed. I thank you all for your patience.

AN2: Speaking of which, check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P\*\*\*\*\*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN3 (What the Sinister Man is reading): Alexandra Quick and the Worlds Away by Inverarity. The always excellent Alexandra Quick series continues with Alex's 5th year. And Inverarity doesn't start posting until the entire story is complete, so there will be no long gaps between chapters. Easily the best HP fic series involving OCs.

AN4: Special thanks to my Discord editors: Adam Sitrich, ido, MihelRika, Miss Andrist, Mr. Arcanum, Pokeflute, Prince of Conspiracy, ProgKingHughesker, and sfu.

AN5: Vital Statistics: 11,822 reviews (top 16). 13,168 followers (top 12). 11,421 favorites (top 41).

# What's Past Is Prologue (pt 2)

## Chapter Notes

### SHAMELESS PLUG!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

***Harry Potter  
and the Death Eater Menace***

***Harry Potter and all associate characters and  
situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no  
claim to ownership.***

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## ***CHAPTER 35: What's Past Is Prologue (pt 2)***

***THE PAST  
19 November 1975***

Bane looked around the clearing carefully but saw no threats.



It was a cold November, and an early snow covered the grounds of Hogwarts. But the thick canopy in this part of the Forbidden Forest kept the floor mostly free of it even as it blocked out the light of the stars and even the full moon. The young Centaur had been charged with patrolling this part of the Forbidden Forest tonight, and while he shared his kind's skill with a bow and knowledge of the forest's dangers, boredom and mild curiosity had led him to wander outside the territory that had been warded for the Centaurs' protection. Or perhaps for the protection of others from the Centaurs – opinion was divided in the tribe as to who the real beneficiaries were.

Suddenly, there was commotion as some wild animal, at first unfamiliar to Bane, burst into the clearing. Bane gasped in shock when he recognized the beast as a werewolf! Instantly, he notched an arrow into his bow in what he knew was likely a futile gesture. Not only was a werewolf fast enough to evade an arrow, only a perfect shot right through the eye and into the brain would kill or even slow down a creature blessed with such regenerative powers. The werewolf snarled at Bane before dodging the Centaur's first arrow with ease. Quickly, Bane reached for another arrow even though it was already too late, for the monster had gone into a crouch and was ready to pounce.

But then, even as the werewolf leaped for Bane's throat, it was knocked aside by a new combatant. Despite himself, Bane gasped again, for the werewolf was joined by a Grim! The Centaur's heart grew cold at the sign of the death omen whose presence surely meant that his own doom was nigh. How odd that he'd seen nothing in the stars to warn him of his own grim fate tonight.

Bane's amazement only grew when the growling black mastiff interposed itself between him and the werewolf as if

to protect him. Even more bizarrely, a magnificent stag, bigger than any that he'd ever seen in the forest, bounded into the clearing to join the black dog in his defense. The werewolf looked between the dog, the stag, and the Centaur who stood slack-jawed on the other side of them. And then, its hungry snarls turned into a petulant whine, as if the monster were throwing a childish tantrum at being denied its prey.

Only then did Bane notice the final absurdity. For perched on top of the stag, holding onto its antlers for dear life, was a *rat*. And even as it clutched the antlers tightly with four claws and a tail, the rat's attention was focused on the werewolf. It showed not a bit of fear. On the contrary, the rat chattered and squealed at the werewolf as if angrily remonstrating it for its rudeness in threatening the Centaur's life. The werewolf lowered its head in submission before turning to bound back into the forest the way it had come. The dog, the stag, and the rat all three turned to look at Bane - each demonstrating *unmistakable* intelligence with its expression - before following after the werewolf.

Bane exhaled slowly in relief before turning back towards the Centaurs' camp. The rest of the herd would need to know what he'd seen. But before he could move a single hoof, he halted in surprise at his last visitor of the evening. Floating in the air ahead of and above him, a man in black robes perched on a broomstick shimmered into view, the wand in his hand instantly marking him as a wizard. Bane snarled and reached for another arrow, but once again, he was too late.

**"*OBLIViate!*"**

Bane looked around the clearing carefully but saw no threats. He shook his head and resumed his patrol.

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### ***A few hours later ...***

The three Animagi carefully herded their werewolf friend towards the Whomping Willow. Under the effects of the latest version of Master Belby's Wolfsbane Potion, Remus was more docile than a normal werewolf, enough so that the stag, the dog, and the rat could deter him from attacking anyone or anything they encountered.

Surprisingly to them all, it was Peter in his rat form who was most able to "reach" Remus while he was in his wild lupine state. None of the four could truly communicate in a human sense, but they all shared a rudimentary "animal tongue" that allowed limited communication between all animagi and (according to their Unspeakable tutors) most quasi-sentient animals. Peter, for whatever reason, was the one best able to communicate complex concepts and even orders while transformed. James had joked about taking his stag form at home over Christmas to see if he could communicate with his mother's pet kneazle, but their Animagery tutor's angry expression had put that idea out of his head.

In fact, at times, James was mildly jealous about how well Peter adapted to Animagery despite his initial embarrassment over such a small and seemingly weak form. James had struggled far longer than both Peter and Sirius in achieving the transformation, despite his natural skill at Transfiguration. And even after mastering his new form, he had the least direct influence over Remus during his Change. The werewolf treated the black dog as a fellow canine and a member of its pack, apparently, and it outright deferred to *the rat* for some odd reason. But while it would not attack the stag even though it was a prey animal, it was not nearly as *respectful* as James would have expected given the stag's place in noble heraldry and (James thought

privately) his own undisputed status as the leader of their quartet. It was oddly uncomfortable to feel as though he were at the bottom of the pecking order instead of the top.

While the stag and the dog flanked the twitchy werewolf, the rat darted under the violent tree's branches and pressed the knot at the base. The tree went still, and the secret entryway revealed itself. Moments later, the trio had herded the werewolf back into the Shrieking Shack. Inside, the researchers of Project Romulus were waiting nervously behind their strongest shields, with several Patronuses already active to help the three Animagi as they shepherded their friend into the runic circle where a freshly slaughtered pig was waiting. Remus fell on the carcass with a hungry growl, and one of the Unspeakables called out an activation spell, causing the runic circle to flare to life. Only then, did the older wizards relax their defenses and the three boys return to their human forms.

While several of the Unspeakables began casting diagnostic Charms on Remus (who ignored them all to focus on rending the flesh from the pig), others escorted James, Sirius, and Peter to a separate room for a quick debriefing by Unspeakable Rookwood, their former DADA instructor. After the boys answered his questions, he left them alone to have a light snack.

"Man," Sirius muttered, "it's been years since we had him for DADA, and he still creeps me out."

"He's not so bad," Peter muttered while biting down on a scone.

"Pete, don't speak with your mouth full," James chided. "It's gross."

Sirius laughed. "Says the guy who chews his cud while in his Animagus form."

Potter sniffed. "Don't you start with me, Sirius Black. We've all seen how you lick yourself when you think none of us are watching."

All three boys laughed at that. Then, James changed the topic.

"Listen, I've been thinking. The Christmas Hols are coming up, and I was wondering if you two and Remus would like to come visit. My family has this big New Year's Eve party every year, but it's mostly old people and I'd like to have my friends there."

Sirius seemed thoughtful. "I'd love to, but my parents would never allow it." Then, he grinned. "So I guess I won't tell them!"

"Great!" James exclaimed. "How about you, Pete?"

Pettigrew looked doubtful. "I dunno what my Mum will say. I mean, she's ... she's sick a lot. Besides, I don't have any formal robes."

"Aw, that's not a problem," James said easily. "I can order you a set. It won't cost hardly anything."

"... you don't need to ... just *buy* me things, James," Peter said uncomfortably.

"Don't look a gift hippogriff in the mouth, Wormtail," Sirius interjected. "If someone offers you a gift, just accept it gracefully. Like I do. Speaking of which, I need dress robes too, Prongs."

Peter looked at Sirius in confusion. "... Worm ... tail? And ... Prongs?"

James sniffed. "Oh yeah. Sirius has decided that we need nicknames. Apparently, I'm Prongs, he's Padfoot, Remus is Moony, and you're Wormtail."

"Charming. Do I get a say in this? And is it a good idea to nickname Remus after *the Moon*?"

"No and why not, respectively," Sirius said smugly. "Honestly, after more than four years of disappearing on the night of each full moon, the only person who's even suspected that Remus was a werewolf was the Hellflower. And she only thought that because of Muggle superstitions that we quickly disabused her of. I think Moony's secret is safe no matter what we call him."

"Uh-huh," the newly christened Wormtail said dubiously. "And I'm guessing Hellflower is Lily Evan's new and undesired nickname."

Sirius smirked. "Actually, James came up with that one."

In response, Potter blushed. "Come on, Sir- er *Padfoot*. I was angry when I said that. She's not that bad."

"She hexed your underwear to feel like deep-heating ointment," Sirius replied with a smirk.

"To be fair, that was only after James hexed Snape's hair orange," Peter added.

"You mean, after *Prongs* hexed *Snivellus's* hair orange," Sirius replied.

"You are not going to let this nickname thing go, are you?" Peter asked with a sour expression.

"No, I will not, Wormtail. No. I. Will. Not."

"In that case ... that's *Mister* Wormtail to you!"

The three boys laughed. If Wormtail's laughter was a bit more forced than the other two, neither noticed.

"Anyway, it's agreed," James said returning to the prior topic. "Next Hogsmeade weekend, we'll stop in at Gladrags and I'll buy new dress robes for Wormtail. And Rem- I mean, Moony too, if he needs them."

Peter looked as though he still wanted to object, but at James's determined expression, he nodded his head with resignation posing as gratitude. Then, the door opened, and Master Belby entered.

"Well, boys, it's time for you to head back to the castle. You need to get at least a few hours of sleep before the dawn."

As he spoke, he handed each of the three a glass vial. Through experience, the boys knew that the potion inside would make it impossible for anyone to detect that they'd been memory-charmed. It was standard procedure for the Unspeakables, apparently, but it was also necessary in this case because James (like most Heirs) carried a Remembrall. Sirius did not, but the Unspeakables knew his family well and suspected that he might be legilimized when at home.

At Belby's direction, the three Marauders followed him back out into the main room. By this point, "Moony" was fast asleep within the protective circle, the blood from his repast still staining his muzzle. As they congregated by the door leading to the tunnel and the Whomping Willow at the

other end, Peter was the first to down his potion before Unspeakable Rookwood began altering his memories. When his work was complete, Peter (and the other two) would remember spending the night in the Forbidden Forest with Remus, keeping the werewolf out of trouble, but they would have no recollection of the Unspeakables' involvement or of what really went on in the Shrieking Shack.

While Rookwood performed his alterations, Sirius's attention was drawn to a nearby table. On it rested a piece of old parchment, empty save for four dots that were labeled with the names of the four Marauders.

"What's this?" he asked a nearby researcher inquisitively. He (or she – it was impossible to identify the genders of any Unspeakables other than Rookwood) glanced at the parchment.

"It's something we came up with to help keep track of you boys while you're off gallivanting. There are warded areas all over the Forest designed to keep various beasts that don't get along very well from encroaching on each other's territories. The paper's charmed to interface with any nearby wards and use them as a tracker for your personal magical signatures."

Sirius nodded. "Was it hard to make?"

The researcher laughed. "Not for us, lad. But we are Unspeakables, after all." Then, s/he was called away by a colleague. Sirius looked around and saw that Rookwood was still working on adjusting Peter's memories and that everyone else's attention was still on Remus. A mischievous grin slid over his face, and he quickly snatched up the parchment before anyone could see and stuffed it into a pocket.



Thirty minutes later, the exhausted trio was carefully sneaking back into their dorm room under cover of James's Cloak of Invisibility. As Sirius was undressing, he was surprised to find a folded parchment in his pocket that he'd never seen before. He opened it up and his eyes widened.

"Hey guys, come check this out." Peter and James came over and looked at his discovery. The parchment was blank except for the words "ANALYZING WARD STRUCTURE" written in a Gothic script which soon faded away to be replaced with a single word: "INTERFACING." Then, that word also faded to be replaced by three tiny dots each labeled with one of their names.

"Cool!" James said. "How did you get it to do that?"

Sirius smiled. "I have absolutely no idea! But I can't wait to find out!"

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## **PRESENT**

### **The Office of the Hogwarts Caretaker 10:30 a.m.**

With a confidence that he'd never once felt when he'd been a student sent to the Caretaker's Office for detention, Peter Pettigrew sauntered up to the office door and rapped sharply with his knuckles.

"Come in!" said a gruff voice from the inside. Pettigrew entered and took stock of the new Hogwarts Caretaker. He was much younger than Filch had been even when Peter had been a First Year. But his clothes were threadbare and worn, and his auburn hair and beard were both shaggy. Had James not revealed months earlier that the Caretaker was a wizard with exceptional skill at obscure defensive magic (and had Jim not revealed that he was the

boy's *Animagery tutor!*), Peter would have assumed that he was a Squib, just like his predecessor.

The Caretaker froze in surprise at Peter's entrance before schooling his facial features into a sneer that Pettigrew found unconvincing.

"Can I help you?"

Peter stepped towards the desk. "I should hope so. My name is Peter Pettigrew. I am Jim Potter's godfather and also Seneschal and Solicitor for his House. Mr. Sturgeon, I presume?"

Sturgeon's lip curled up in an exaggerated sneer. "That's my name, Mr. Pettigrew. So what brings you to see me? Has the little whippersnapper been complaining about his detentions? You'll find I'm tough but fair. I've hardly ever had to get out the whips and chains."

Pettigrew crooked an eyebrow. "I would be surprised to learn you'd ever used whips and chains on the son of an Ancient and Noble House," he said curtly. "Especially considering the criminal penalties that might be imposed on someone who dared use corporal punishment against him without the proper authority."

He took a seat across from the other man. "No, sir. I am here because Jim informs me that you have been tutoring him in Animagery. I happen to know that Animagery is a very difficult and dangerous branch of transfigurative magic. I have not yet informed the boy's father – who is also *the Chief Auror* – because Jim told me this in confidence. But I certainly have questions about how a *Caretaker* can possibly be qualified to teach Animagery when he himself is not on the Animagus Registry. Are you an Animagus, sir?"

Sturgeon smiled. "No, sir. As a matter of fact, I am not. Though I can assure you I am ... intimately familiar with the process." He tilted his head in a manner that Peter found oddly familiar. "Are *you* an Animagus, Mr. Pettigrew?"

Peter stiffened. "I am not the one holding myself out as an expert on the topic. I wish to know your credentials, sir. And if I am not satisfied with them, I warn you I will immediately take this matter up with your employer, Professor Dumbledore. And with the DMLE!"

Sturgeon stared at the other man before letting out a wry chuckle. "Wow. That was actually rather intimidating on your part. I'd have hardly recognized you from the shy boy I met on the train."

Peter furrowed his brow. "You and I were at Hogwarts together?" He asked in confusion.

Instead of answering, the Caretaker unlocked a drawer in his desk and withdrew a folded slip of parchment.

"My credentials, Mr. Pettigrew. I'm sure you'll find them in order."

With a dubious expression, Peter unfolded the paper and then read the contents. His eyebrows shot up in surprise and he looked up at the other man who was grinning infectiously at him.

"... Moony?!" he sputtered in shock and then delight.

Remus laughed. "Hello, old friend."

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## **THE PAST**

5 November 1976

Gryffindor Tower  
The Sixth Year Boys' Dormitory  
Just before dusk

"What do you *mean* you've sworn off pranks?!" Peter spat furiously. "You read the *Daily Prophet*! You know what those bastards did to Marlene's parents! Sirius won't even talk to us, he's so upset. He's been off by himself all day!"

"None of which has any bearing on whether we should hex a bunch of random Slytherins in retaliation," James answered calmly. "What happened to the McKinnons was awful, but we don't even know which Death Eaters were responsible, let alone whether any of them have any kids at Hogwarts. And even if we did, it would be wrong to target kids for what their parents might have done."

Peter stared at his friend dumbstruck. "Who are you and what have you done with James Potter?"

James sighed. "Wormtail, it's me, okay? I just ... decided maybe its time to ... I dunno ... grow up a little?"

"Is this because of what Frank Longbottom said last June?" Peter asked. Then, his eyes narrowed. "Or is it because you're still trying to win Lily Evans' fickle heart?"

James's own eyes flashed. "Don't talk about her like that, Wormtail. And anyway, it's not like that. It's just ... she said she'd go with me to Hogsmeade next weekend if I made it to that point without any pranks, okay? I only have a week to go, so I'm not going to blow things now by doing something stupid, no matter how much the slimy snakes might deserve it."

Peter was still amazed. "Wow. I honestly never believed you'd prioritize anyone on earth above Sirius Black."

"I'm not prioritizing *anything*, Wormy. I just ...." James trailed off, as if unable to articulate his feelings. "I want to be with her, okay? More than any girl I've ever known. I can't explain it, but ... Lily is everything to me. And if giving up juvenile pranks is what it takes, then that's what I'll do."

Peter said nothing. His expression was one of confusion, as if he couldn't quite grasp Potter's words.

James sighed deeply. "Look, we'll see how Hogsmeade goes. If it doesn't work out between us, maybe we can do something to the Slytherins next week. I'm sure Sirius will be back soon – we're supposed to head out to the Shrieking Shack around 10. We'll talk on the way."

But at that moment, Sirius Black himself dashed into the room with a terrified expression and waving the Marauders' Map wildly.

"Prongs! We gotta go after Snivellus! He's on his way to the tree now!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, Pads," James said as he tried to calm his excitable best friend down. "What are you babbling now?"

Breathless and near tears, Sirius spoke. "I'm sorry! I was just so ... angry! I know I shouldn't have done it! I just didn't think Snivellus would be so *stupid*!"

"*SIRIUS!*" James finally bellowed. "GET A GRIP! Now what the HELL are you on about?!"

Sirius took a deep breath. "I ... I told Snivellus how to get past the Whomping Willow. I think he's on his way there now to catch Moony while he's transforming!"

James's eyes widened in horror, and he snatched the Map out of Sirius's hands and dashed out of the room. Sirius was just about to follow when he felt the sharp pain of suddenly-long fingernails digging into his shoulder. It was Wormtail, though for a moment, Sirius almost didn't recognize the other Marauder. His eyes blazed with a feral rage, and his teeth ... when did they get so *sharp and pointy*?!

"YOU BASTARD!"

Peter slugged Sirius in the jaw as hard as he could, dislodging at least one of his teeth which flew across the room. Sirius went down, and a second later, Peter was on top of him, pounding on his head while screaming obscenities. By the time a few other Gryffindors had entered the room drawn by the noise and pulled Pettigrew away, Sirius was already unconscious.

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Hours later, he was in the Infirmary nursing a nasty headache along with the annoying sensation of having teeth regrowing in his jaw when the Headmaster entered. Behind him followed the body of Severus Snape floating in the air. For one terrible second, Sirius thought the Slytherin was dead, but then, Snape twitched violently, and Sirius realized that he was in the grip of some sort of unconscious seizure. There were no signs of blood on him which was a relief. James Potter followed the Headmaster in and watched as Snape was maneuvered onto a bed where Madam Pomfrey began an examination.

The other Marauder refused to even glance in his direction.

"James ...?" Sirius began, but the Headmaster flicked his wand towards him without even looking (though his anger was obvious). Instantly, Sirius was both silenced and

deafened, unable to speak or to hear the brief conversation between Dumbledore and James. After a few seconds, James nodded to the Headmaster and headed for the door. But before he left, the young man who Sirius considered his only real brother finally turned towards him and *gave him such a look!* He'd never seen such fury from James Potter, certainly not directed towards him, and it made Sirius feel sick to think he'd betrayed the Marauders in such a manner.

After several minutes conferring with Madam Pomfrey, Dumbledore came over and dispelled the noise-cancelling Charm that he'd placed on Sirius's bed. His eyes were not twinkling. The old man waited for several terrible seconds before speaking, as if struggling with the words to properly describe what had happened.

"I do not know what you intended to happen tonight, Mr. Black. I can only speculate, and then tell you what you need to be told and made to understand. Severus Snape, acting at your behest, bypassed the Whomping Willow, made his way down the passage, and opened the doorway to the Shrieking Shack, where he encountered Remus Lupin fully transformed into a werewolf. I do not know if it was your intention for Mr. Snape to be slain or simply bitten. If either of those *completely foreseeable consequences* of your foolish actions had occurred, Mr. Lupin would have a date sometime tomorrow with an executioner's ax while *you* would be turned over to the Aurors for a trial before the Wizengamot that would most likely result in a lengthy stay in Azkaban. That you are not facing such a fate – *which by your actions you plainly deserve!* – you may attribute to the fact that you did at least warn Mr. Potter of your foolishness and he arrived in time to save Mr. Snape's life."

Sirius licked his lips nervously.

"You may also attribute to undeserved good fortune the fact that I am limited in how harshly I am allowed to punish you without having to inform the Board of Governors of the reason for the punishment which, of course, would risk exposure of Mr. Lupin's condition. You will serve one month of detention with Mr. Filch. Let me assure you, Mr. Black, it *physically pains me* that I cannot dole out a harsher punishment for what, from all appearances, was a deliberate and premeditated murder attempt!"

The old man took a step closer, and Sirius blanched at the cold harsh gaze of the Defeater of Grindelwald.

"Mr. Snape has ... sworn an oath, after a fashion. He will not reveal the truth of what happened tonight, nor of Mr. Lupin's unfortunate condition. And *you*, Sirius Black, will do *nothing* to him... *ever*. Your time as a "merry prankster" is at an end. Any harmful or embarrassing spells deployed against Severus Snape, or indeed any other student, will be punished as harshly as the school's by-laws allow, up to and including expulsion. Are we *quite* clear?"

Sirius nodded dumbly. Dumbledore turned and headed for the door. Just before he could leave, Sirius called out to him.

"Sir, if he's not really hurt... if Remus didn't even touch him .... Why is Sniv .... Why is Snape unconscious? And why is he shaking like that?"

Dumbledore turned back to study the unconscious Slytherin once more. He stared at the boy for a long time before answering.

"Wolf-fear," he finally said. "Mr. Snape ... Mr. Snape was *exposed* to wolf-fear. And I am afraid he will never be



rid of it."

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## THE PRESENT

The Hogwarts Infirmary

14 February 1994

11:30 a.m.

The Headmaster had been in his office reviewing proposed Wizengamot bills and trying to distract himself from worry over his Potions Master when a shining silver nightingale appeared on his desk. It was Madam Pomfrey's Patronus.

"Headmaster," it said. "Severus is awake."

The old man nodded solemnly and then made his way down to the Infirmary. At a glance from him, the matron withdrew to her office without a word. There was no one else present, but Dumbledore still surrounded Snape's bed and the chair he'd conjured near it with the strongest privacy Charms he knew. Snape was awake, and the paleness that resulted from his former condition was offset by the fire in his eyes. He said nothing at first, but his fury was evident. Finally, Dumbledore spoke.

"I understand from Mr. Potter – *your* Mr. Potter, obviously – that you have ... recalled previously forgotten details about the incident in the Shrieking Shack."

Snape snorted. "Details? Only the most important detail, *Dumbledore!* That the *incident* that has plagued my mind for almost fourteen years is an *utter fabrication*." He glowered at the older man before speaking in a low angry voice.

"I have done *everything* you have asked of me. I risked *my life* as a spy in the heart of the Dark Lord's inner circle. I

have borne the indignities of *teaching incompetent dunderheaded children* for over a decade. I have sworn, at risk to my own life, to protect *the spawn* of the man I hate above all others over a *completely fictitious life debt!*"

He took a long deep breath. "So here is what is going to happen now, Albus Dumbledore. You will tell me the truth! You will tell me *everything* about what *really* happened in the Shrieking Shack in 1976! Or I swear to you I will leave this castle *today* as your sworn enemy!"

Dumbledore sat in silence as Snape finished his tirade.

"Well?!" Snape snapped. "What do you have to say for yourself?!"

The old man drew a deep slow breath.

"Seventeen eager violinists..." he began slowly.

Snape face twisted in confusion. "... what?"

"... erupted righteously ..." Dumbledore continued.

"Are you having a stroke or something?"

"... until sunset."

Snape opened his mouth to shout at the man for spouting nonsense. But then, he paused suddenly, blinked his eyes repeatedly, and he slowly closed his mouth.

"Oh," he finally said. "I see."

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***THE PAST***  
***5 November 1976***

Young Severus Snape stood transfixed at the sight before him. "*Remus Lupin – a werewolf?*" he thought wildly. "*And the subject of strange experiments conducted under the auspices of the Headmaster himself? What was going on here?*"

His paralysis was ended rudely when James Potter burst through the still-open doorway and almost knocked him down.

"SNAPE! Dammit man, are you *trying* to get ... yourself ... killed?!" Potter trailed off as he looked around the room, seemingly just as confused as Snape. "Headmaster? What's going on...."

"Jealous Aardvarks Make Elegant Soups," Rookwood interrupted sharply.

"... here ... oh." Potter's confused babbling trailed off as his memories of Project Romulus were restored. "Sorry, everybody. I tried to head Snivellus off but he was too fast for me."

"Never mind that, Potter," Belby said. "How did this young man get past the Whomping Willow in the first place?"

"Sirius." "Black." Potter and Snape spoke simultaneously and then turned and glared angrily at one another. Then, the two boys (and several of the adults) were startled when the werewolf barked out a *laugh*.

Moments later, a group consisting of the two boys and about half of the adult wizards were crowded into the nearby conference room. Dumbledore, Croaker, Belby, and Rookwood were among the group. At Dumbledore's direction, both Snape and Potter explained what had happened, and Potter paled at the old man's expression.

"Professor Dumbledore," Potter began, "I know you're angry at Sirius for this. So am I, in all honesty. But ... no one got hurt or anything."

"That is not the point, Mr. Potter. Under the influence of the false memories Mr. Black carried, he *believed* that Mr. Snape would be intruding on an unrestrained and uncontrolled werewolf with potentially lethal results." Dumbledore's face hardened. "And possibly with lethal *intentions*."

Potter shook his head. "No, no, he came to me in a panic. He never believed that Sniv ... I mean, that Snape would actually come down here until he saw it on ...."

Potter's voice trailed off uncertainly.

"On *what*, Mr. Potter?"

James paused in apparent agony before he finally reached into a pocket and withdrew the Marauder's Map. He hadn't had the time to close it properly, and when he unfolded it, the Map still showed the Hogwarts interior and the multitude of names on it, most now in their individual dorms.

"... the hell?" Croaker muttered. "Where did you get this?" he asked.

"We made it," James said proudly. "I mean, that is ... well, I think the parchment originally came from here and Sirius pinched it one night as we were being memory charmed before leaving. We found it when we got back to the dorm. At first, it only showed the Marauders on it, but after a few months of research, we figured out how to modify the Charms already on the parchment so that they could

interface with the Hogwarts wards and identify everyone who was in the castle or on the grounds."

He grinned proudly. "We even figured out how to use the Homunculus Charm to put copies of ourselves into it. Isn't that right, guys?"

The last question was directed towards the Map itself, and the diagram of the castle faded away to be replaced by an ornate script.

***"Mr. Prongs is appalled that James Potter would reveal the secrets of the Marauder's Map to whoever the blazes he's babbling to. Is it Snivellus? Mr. Prongs thinks he smells something foul nearby!"***

Beside him, Snape growled angrily as the parchment was soon covered by a stream of vulgarities from all four "Marauders" that insulted everything about him from his hygiene to his political views to the size of his nose. It didn't help that several of the Unspeakables were visibly impressed by the four Gryffindors' ability to expand the obscure but basically simple Charm they had originally placed on a plain scrap of parchment into the sophisticated magical item before them. Potter puffed up with pride at the recognition, while Snape ground his teeth in response.

Dumbledore was also unamused. "Turn it off, Mr. Potter. I assume there is a mechanism for doing so."

"Oh, yeah, I mean ... yes sir!" Potter tapped the Map with his wand. "Mischief managed," he said, and the writing faded to leave a blank parchment. Potter's proud expression faltered when Dumbledore took the parchment, folded it, and placed it in his own pocket.

"But Professor ...!"

"Mr. Potter," Dumbledore interrupted firmly. "While I applaud your ingenuity and that of your friends in enchanting this item, it clearly represents an appalling breach of the privacy of your fellow students. I cannot allow it to remain in your possession."

The Gryffindor was aghast, and beside him, Snape fought unsuccessfully to keep a smirk off his own face. Dumbledore turned to Rookwood.

"Augustus, when Mr. Potter leaves here tonight and you alter his memories, please include some plausible scenario in which he is discovered with the Map by someone on the Hogwarts staff who then confiscates it."

Rookwood nodded. "And what about the other one?" he asked nodding towards Snape.

"Well," said Croaker, "unlike the three Gryffindors when *they* slipped past our obviously inadequate defenses, this little idiot has only known about our activities for less than half an hour. Surely, Albus, you will concede that Obliviation is acceptable in *this* instance. After all, we only need to tweak his memories of discovering us. We leave everything else intact but insert a memory of young Potter here intervening before he made it into the Shrieking Shack."

Snape sneered at the reference to him as being a "little idiot," but his expression quickly changed to one of horror at the thought of Obliviation. "Headmaster, please! You cannot ...."

"Be at ease, Mr. Snape," Albus said reassuringly before turning to glower at Croaker. "My opposition to involuntary memory Charms is as strong as ever, Saul. Indeed, as you may recall, you had to overcome my opposition

to *voluntary* obliviations of minors where Potter, Black, and Pettigrew were concerned."

This whole time, Rookwood had been studying Snape speculatively, and he finally spoke.

"Besides, Saul, there's a further complication – young Master Snape has at least rudimentary Occlumency shields. Probably a natural Occlumens, as I suspected when I had him as a student. There might well be complications if I try to Oblivate him and he fights back psychically."

"And how, *exactly*, did you learn that one of your students was a natural Occlumens, Augustus?" Albus said in a cold voice. "Or perhaps I should ask instead, just how many of my students did you *illegally* legilimize during your year as a teacher in my school?"

Rookwood merely gave an amiable smile, as if he had no idea what the Headmaster was talking about. Then, Belby spoke up for the very first time.

"Well, if we can't use standard Obliviation on the lad – and I agree with Albus that we shouldn't – is there any sort of deal we can offer him so he consents to a Memory Lock like the others? Maybe he wants to be an Animagus too ... or something along those lines."

Potter looked mortally offended at the idea of Severus Snape joining the Marauders in their monthly Animagus adventures, but Snape himself gasped, his eyes widening in recognition.

"You ... you are *Damocles Belby*!" he exclaimed. The Potions Master crooked an eyebrow.

"I am indeed. You know of me, young man?"

Snape scoffed. "*Know of you?! You are only the preeminent Potions Master in Western Europe! I remember your picture in the *Daily Prophet* when you were awarded your third Silver Cauldron Award!*"

Rookwood snorted. "It appears you have a *fan*, Belby."

Damocles studied the boy more closely. "Hang on a moment ... Snape ... Snape... Severus Snape? I think Horace Slughorn might have mentioned you in a letter. One of his more promising students."

Belby addressed Albus. "Every year, Horace keeps me updated on his NEWTs Potions class and any students who he thinks might be apprentice material. Usually, he only sends me one promising candidate every three or four years, but last summer, he said there were *two* rising 6th Years to whom I should extend a preliminary invitation. Severus Snape and some Muggleborn named Lily Evans."

Then, the potioneer turned back to Snape. "I take it you are this Potions prodigy Horace was referring to?"

"I am Severus Snape, sir. And I am in Sixth Year NEWTs Potions under Professor Slughorn along with Lily Evans."

Belby studied the boy with greater interest and his eyes narrowed. "Tell me, Mr. Snape, what would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

The boy scoffed dismissively at the ease of the question. "The first stage of the formula for Draught of Living Death, of course."

"And from there?"



"Stir clockwise twice. Then add one sloth brain and followed by Sopophorous bean juice."

"How many beans?" Belby interrupted.

Snape hesitated. "Libatious Borage says twelve in *Advanced Potion-Making*, but ... I believe the brewing process would be quicker and more stable with thirteen."

"Do you indeed?" Belby said sardonically, as if amused by the boy's arrogance. "Any other changes to this formula that's been tried and true for six centuries?"

Snape's face flushed at the implied rebuke, but then he rallied and continued more confidently. "Yes. I have found that the Sopophorous bean releases its juice more efficiently if crushed with a silver dagger rather than cut. Also, during the final step, I have found it better to stir anticlockwise seven times as recommended but then to add one final clockwise stir before bottling."

"... found it better?" Belby asked slowly. "You have *successfully* brewed Draught of Living Death? Not just brewed but also improved its formula? As a Sixth Year student?"

Snape lifted his chin almost defiantly. "As a *Third Year*, Master Belby." Then, he hesitated with a slight grimace. "In the interest of full disclosure, however, I should confess that Lily Evans and I worked on that potion together, and we were both able to brew it successfully during the same private session."

Potter glared at Snape after his mention of Lily Evans and his reminder that Snape was once closer to her than he had ever been ... and after tonight would probably ever be. For his part, Belby simply stared at Snape impassively. Of the

others in the room, only Dumbledore was knowledgeable enough to be suitably impressed by what Snape had said. Finally, Belby pulled out his wand and summoned a notebook from another room. He flipped to a particular page before turning the book around so Severus could see it.

"What do you make of this formula, Mr. Snape?"

Severus read over the ingredients and blanched. "Well, I certainly wouldn't want to be the one to drink it. There are multiple deadly poisons without any counteracting reagents. Other than murdering a large group of people, I can't see what this could be ... used ... for...."

His voice trailed off and he studied the potions formula more closely. His eyes widened and he glanced over at the wall that separated them all from the main room and the werewolf contained within it.

"You ... this potion is intended for treatment of lycanthropy, isn't it?"

A murmur of surprise passed over the adults in the room.

"How the devil could you deduce that just from a list of ingredients?!" Croaker exclaimed.

"Well, for starters - there *is* a fairly docile werewolf in the next room who addressed me personally when I came in," Snape said archly, his customary prickliness reasserting itself as his fear lessened. "Furthermore, while the primary ingredient is aconite, it also incorporates selenium, mercury, and powdered moonseed. Paracelsus suggested that those four materials would likely form the basis of any possible cure for lycanthropy in 1539, but he died before he could begin any formal experimentation."

At that, Belby's stern expression melted into a grin. "Ten points for Slytherin if I were a Professor and allowed to give them. Alrighty then. Here is my proposal to you, Mr. Snape. You graduate in June of 1978. Normally, I would select my next apprentice in the summer of 1977 for a three-year program, but I can come up with a good reason to put it off for a year. I'll just open up the selection process to 1977 and 1978 graduates. I will guarantee you get an invitation to apply for an apprenticeship with me conditional on three things. One, that you graduate with good grades overall and with no disciplinary issues. Two, that you pull an O on your Potions NEWTs and at least an EE on Charms, Transfiguration, and Herbology."

Belby took a deep breath. "And *Three*, you freely consent to allowing Rookwood here to use the False Memory Charm on you to block off your memories of what you've seen tonight."

Snape's eyes widened, but then his face grew dark. "I do not wish to claim an apprenticeship, even one as prestigious as a Belby apprenticeship, simply as a *bribe*! If I am to become your apprentice ... or *anyone's* apprentice, I will have the job on my own merits!"

Belby laughed. "Oh, no fear there, Mr. Snape. I am *not* offering you an apprenticeship! I'm just guaranteeing you get in the door. The selection process takes three months, and to actually become my apprentice, you will have to beat out the top Potions students from Durmstrang, Beauxbatons, Ilvermorny, Castelobruxo, and Koldovstoretz and from *two* years' worth of candidates instead of just one. *That* is what I am offering you, Mr. Snape. A foot in the door."

Snape said nothing, though his face clearly showed his yearning for the opportunity and his complete confidence that he could win the apprenticeship even if Merlin himself showed up to also apply for it. But then, he closed his eyes as some new thought entered his head. After several seconds of thought, he opened his eyes once more with new purpose.

"I have a condition," he said.

Rookwood sneered. "'A *condition*,' he says. The boy is even more arrogant than when he was my student!"

"Hush, Gus," Croaker said. "What is your condition, young man?"

Snape ignored them both to focus his attention back on Master Belby. "If I do this, you will make an offer to apply after graduation both to myself ... and to Lily Evans, assuming she also meets your first two requirements."

Potter's head snapped towards his rival in shock. "Why would you possibly want Lily to be in competition against you?! What – do you want the satisfaction of defeating a *Mudblood* who's been your rival since you started school?!"

"Mister Potter!" Albus exclaimed angrily.

"I do not have to explain my motivations to the likes of *you*, Potter!" Snape spat.

"Perhaps," Belby said. "But you will explain them to me, Mr. Snape. Why are you asking for Miss Evans to receive such treatment?"

Snape stared at his idol sullenly for several seconds before answering. "Because ... she is as good as me. I am not willing to concede that she is *better* at Potions than I am. But she is *as good* as me. And I will not claim an apprenticeship that she might well earn on the merits through a personal advantage that she could not possibly have."

James stared at his rival in amazement, almost speechless at Snape's gallantry towards Lily Evans even after the events of the previous Spring that had broken them apart. It was practically *Gryffindorish*! For a moment, he considered trying to be the bigger man for once and speak to Lily on Snape's behalf to try and reconcile them. Then, he grimaced as he realized that would not, *could not*, happen simply because they both would soon lose all memory of this entire conversation.

The deliberations continued for a few more minutes as the Unspeakables finalized their "arrangement" with Snape, specifically the substance of his altered memories (which would also be copied into James's memories when he left as well). Rookwood argued that it would not do for James to simply catch Snape before he made it into the Shack, or else Snape would not believe that Lupin was a werewolf and he might try to come back again.

Instead, the Unspeakable maintained that, within the false memory, Snape would have to actually *see* the transformed werewolf and then see James Potter defend him against it. The subconscious sense of obligation he would then feel towards Potter, combined with a subliminal suggestion that a life debt might be in play would justify Snape's internalized belief that he was bound against revealing Lupin's status as a werewolf.

"I do *not* owe James Potter a life debt!" Snape spat angrily. "He did *nothing* to save me, not that I even needed saving in the first place!"

"We are all well aware of the truth of what has happened, Mr. Snape," Rookwood snapped. "But Project Romulus is an extremely important mission whose secrecy must be preserved. And so, you will *accept* these altered memories of James Potter saving your life and the subsequent rationalization that you must tell no one about it. There is a *Greater Good* at stake, young man."

Snape nodded, though he was still clearly unhappy about the matter.

"Good," Rookwood continued. "Now, an important question. Just how strong is your Occlumency?"

The young Slytherin thought about the question. "I ... do not know. I have a natural resistance to mind-reading, but it's all instinctual. I only learned of Occlumency, and my natural aptitude for it, just two years ago. I would estimate that I'm a Level 3 or close to it."

"Why is this important, Gus?" Saul Croker asked. "The boy is consenting to memory modification so his Occlumency rating shouldn't matter."

"It matters because if the boy gains a *memory* of encountering a werewolf, but has no memory of *wolf-fear*, the memory won't even be believable to *him* let alone anyone else who sees it in the future. However, if he is truly a Level 3 Occlumens, I can use Legilimency to incorporate a controlled memory of experiencing wolf-fear within the matrix of the false memory without actually damaging his mind. He will simply believe that he encountered a werewolf but that his own mental shields protected him."

Rookwood sneered at Snape contemptuously. "I imagine it will make him *even more arrogant*."

"Mr. Snape..." Dumbledore began.

"It's alright, Headmaster. Professor Rookwood is probably right. I know enough about werewolves from my DADA studies to be suspicious of any memory of encountering one without feeling the accompanying terror. But I really am a good Occlumens for my age if I do say so myself. I believe I can resist the wolf-fear and experience the memory as the Professor claims."

With intense reluctance, Dumbledore acquiesced to Snape's confident words. Now quite tired from the evening's exertions, Dumbledore left the meeting room along with Belby and most of the Unspeakables, leaving only Rookwood and an assistant to Memory Charm Potter and Snape. Still, the old wizard found the entire deception distasteful and did not wish to be a part of it even as a witness. Instead, he made his way over to where the transformed Remus Lupin sat within his protective circle.

"How are you feeling, Remus?" he asked slowly and cautiously.

"*Tired ... hed hurtz, feel ... foggy*," the werewolf growled. He sniffed the air a few times. "*Kin still smell Sniv...lus. Makin' m'hungry*."

Albus swallowed. "He'll be leaving soon." He paused to gather his words. "Earlier, you ... laughed upon hearing how Mr. Snape came to be here. Why? Was it ... something to do with the thought of ... hurting him?"

The shaggy wolfman shook his head quickly. "*No, no hurt Sniv...lus. Jus' funny. Sniv...lus 'n Prongs talkin' at once*."

*More alike den know."*

Dumbledore smiled. His greatest fear for the last 5+ years had been the thought of the werewolf breaking containment and harming a student or some other innocent. His *second* greatest fear was that through some terrible misstep, the potions and spells Remus had been subjected to as part of Project Romulus would cause him to lose whatever strange X-factor allowed the boy to retain his sanity and morality despite twelve years of Emeric Belasco's damnable curse.

Dumbledore's reverie was shattered by the sound of a boy's screams coming from the meeting room. Dumbledore practically ran back into the room to see two Unspeakables holding Snape down on the floor while Rookwood tried to force his eyes open. But that proved impossible, so Unspeakable Croaker pulled his wand and stunned the boy into sleep. James Potter, who had already been memory charmed and left in a light trance, sat on a chair in the corner, oblivious to what had been taking place.

"What the devil has been going on in here, Gus?" Croaker said angrily. The other man shook his head ruefully and displayed a terrible regret.

"I'm sorry, Saul, Albus. I did my best to contain things but ... I'm afraid Mr. Snape's Occlumency shields were nowhere near as well-developed as he'd claimed. I had the false memories in place, but when I tried to add a layer for the wolf-fear, he panicked and started fighting me. The wolf-fear memory got away from me. It's lodged deep in his psyche now. It's as real to Snape as if he actually had encountered a feral werewolf."



Albus pushed past Rookwood and knelt on the floor next to the stricken boy. He gently opened up Snape's eyes and peered into them. Croaker shook his head.

"What a cock-up," he sighed in frustration. "It's okay, Gus. I'm sure you did your best." He turned to the Headmaster. "How does it look, Albus? Will he recover?"

Dumbledore withdrew from his mental scan. "It's too soon to tell," he said without looking up at the others. "We'll need to get him to Madam Pomfrey, I suppose." Damocles Belby was aghast at the news of such a promising young student suffering what was often a debilitating mental illness.

At Croaker's direction, several of the still-anonymous Unspeakables levitated the unconscious Snape out of the room, followed by the still somnambulant James Potter. Once back in the main room, the werewolf gave out a low soft moan at the sight of the injured Snape, while Belby accosted Rookwood for more information.

No one noticed Dumbledore discreetly pulling out his wand.

"Come now, Gus," said Belby plaintively. "There must be some sort of treatment to help cure wolf-fear!"

"I am sorry, Damocles," Rookwood said placatingly. "Truly sorry. But there is no known psychic healing technique that can outright cure wolf-fear. Still, for the first time since this project began, we now have a test subject for research into that area. With luck, perhaps Severus Snape himself will actually help us in...."

**"*DEPULSO!*"**

Dumbledore's Banishing Spell struck Rookwood squarely in the back with enough force to send him somersaulting into

the far wall. He followed that with an Expelliarmus and an Incarcerous before any of the Unspeakables could even react.

"I am well aware of the bonds of loyalty which connect the Unspeakables to one another," he said with a disturbing mildness. "But I *urge* you all to refrain from drawing your wand against me. Or else I might quite forget myself and relieve you of it ... along with whichever extremity happens to be holding it."

His voice remained genial and mild, but it was laced with steel and reverberated with raw magical power that reminded everyone present that *this* was the Defeater of Grindelwald. In his runic circle, the werewolf hunkered down and whimpered fearfully, its ears pulled back tightly against its head in submission.

Bound on the floor, Rookwood could barely move enough to shake his head in an effort to clear it after the brutal impact.

"Albus! Have you ... gone ... mad?!" he stammered.

"Your mental powers are phenomenal, Augustus Rookwood," Albus said authoritatively while ignoring the man's question. "But in your eagerness to violate Mr. Snape, you grew careless. You focused all your will on a Legilimency attack but in the process allowed your own Occlumency shields to weaken. While you were looking into Severus Snape's eyes, *he was looking into yours!* And when I watched the attack through his memory of it, I could see *through your eyes to the secrets that lay bare within!*"

"What secrets, Albus?" Belby asked fearfully. Albus did not look at the Potions Master. He kept his glare firmly on the truculent Rookwood.

"Why, merely that what just happened to Mr. Snape was no accident or mistake. Unspeakable Rookwood *intentionally* forced his way through the boy's Occlumency shields for the *deliberate goal* of infecting him with severe and chronic wolf-fear!"

Gasps and murmurs fluttered throughout the room as the various researchers absorbed this accusation. Even Croaker was appalled.

"Gus! ... Rookwood! Is ... is this true?!"

Rookwood glared back defiantly. "It was just as I said. We have a test subject now. Lupin is in his Sixth Year at Hogwarts, and the time in which we can research all the elements of lycanthropy is drawing to a close. And yet we have still investigated *nothing* pertaining to wolf-fear, one of the most important aspects of the Change! So yes! When confronted with an unpopular Halfblood who I happen to know has been recently *orphaned*, I seized the opportunity to use him as a test subject who might be the key to saving hundreds of other wizards suffering from wolf-fear. It was for *The Greater Good!*"

At those words, genial elderly Albus Dumbledore *sarled in anger*.

"Do not speak those words to me, Augustus Rookwood. *Let no one here dare to speak to me about The Greater Good!* Not when I, alone among us all, saw firsthand what horrors were wrought by those same words *when carved INTO THE VERY GATES OF NURMENGARD!*"

Those watching Dumbledore fearfully gasped at the reference to the terrible fortress-prison in which (it was

said) the Dark Lord Grindelwald himself was, to this day, the only inmate.

"As I said, Augustus Rookwood, I could see the secrets behind your Occlumency. You did not infect Severus Snape with wolf-fear in hopes of finding a cure for it. You infected him with wolf-fear because your goal is *to weaponize it!* You wanted to research how best to psychically insert memories of wolf-fear into people who had never even been *near* a werewolf. You wanted to shape wolf-fear into just another psychic arrow in your personal Legilimency quiver!"

At that, Croaker turned to his fellow Unspeakable with an expression of horror and contempt.

"Enough, Albus," he said calmly but firmly. "We will take Augustus Rookwood back to the Department of Mysteries. We have the means there to discover the truth no matter how potent his Occlumency is."

"Take him then," Dumbledore said coldly. "But he will have *nothing* to do with this project, even assuming I allow this project to continue any farther."

"Rest easy on that, my friend," Croaker said. "If your accusations are proven true, there will be quite a lot of Unspeakable projects with which Rookwood will have no further involvement ... or memory."

At that, Rookwood's eyes widened in horror. "NO! Damn you, Croaker! NO! My oaths are unbroken. You will not block my memories over this greasy, egotistical Half-blood child! You would not dare! You would ...!"

"**STUPEFY!**" Belby intoned angrily, and Rookwood said nothing more.

With the battle over before anyone else knew it had even begun, Albus turned towards the battered form of Severus Snape, unconscious yet still twitching madly from the lupine nightmares that had been inflicted upon it. Albus closed his eyes.

"Never again," he said softly to no one but himself.

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## ***PRESENT***

### ***The Hogwarts Infirmary***

"And that, as they say, was that," Albus concluded. "At least as far as Project Romulus was concerned. Most of the project was shut down, although Damocles continued to work towards a cure until Remus graduated and left Hogwarts. He quickly became a spy within the Scandinavian werewolf packs for the Order of the Phoenix, so working with Belby became logistically impossible, especially after you became his newest apprentice."

"The rest of the team was reassigned to other areas of research. Rookwood was severely reprimanded and reduced to the lowest level of DOM security, with decades worth of obscure magic and sensitive information locked away seemingly forever. It was eventually a factor in his decision to turn traitor. Apparently, Lord Voldemort offered to restore those lost memories after the conquest of Britain and with it, presumably, the Department of Mysteries. And so, Sirius Black's 'little prank' led to a dangerous man and a powerful wizard becoming a Death Eater."

"He wasn't the only," Snape mumbled.

"Severus, you have long ago earned redemption for taking the Dark Mark. You would not be here talking with me today if that were not so."

Snape looked at him angrily. "I *know* that!" he snapped. "I understand your actions, Albus, and you were not so much to blame as I had first suspected. Still, you were the Headmaster! You had a duty of care towards your students. Even the Slytherin ones!"

Snape closed his eyes to center himself and regain his calm before resuming. "Understand. From *my* perspective derived from those false memories, Sirius Black tried to murder me by sending me after Lupin. Potter saved me, but I believed that it was only to protect Lupin and Black and *himself*. I was always incensed over the so-called life debt because I felt no sense of obligation to him, but I was too afraid of the penalties for denying a life debt to risk it. But worst of all, you punished Black with nothing more than detention! I know why now, but at the time, I thought it was nothing more than a biased Gryffindor teacher favoring spoiled Gryffindor hooligans over the slimy Slytherin snake. I hated you for it. And years later, when I heard the Prophecy...."

Albus looked stricken. "You went to Voldemort ... because of your hatred ... of *me*?"

"No, Albus. I went to Voldemort because I was *afraid* of you."

The old man was speechless. Snape rolled his eyes.

"My mistakes were my own, Albus. Kindly don't seize upon them as a basis for self-destructive martyrdom. But yes. My initial decision to join the Death Eaters was motivated in part by my fear that you would Obliviate me or worse to preserve the secret of the Prophecy. It was not until the Dark Lord announced his belief that the Prophecy referred to an unborn child, and most likely the unborn child of Lily

Potter, that I overcame my fear and disdain for you and offered myself into your service."

Albus said nothing at first. He remembered that night well. And to his shame, he remembered how judgmental he'd been to Snape. "*You disgust me*," he'd said in anger, long before he fully understood the risks the young man had taken and would take in pursuit of redemption.

"What happened with the Wolfsbane Potion?" Snape asked, changing the subject. "Obviously, Master Belby never perfected a cure, and I don't recall him researching anything like it when I studied under him."

"Damocles continued to work on it until Project Romulus was shut down completely after Remus's graduation. At that point, the DOM declared the potion Unspeakable. No version of it had ever protected against the degeneration into homicidal madness that afflicts all werewolves other than Remus. It could only provide a human intelligence for the werewolf's transformed body, and so the risk of the potion falling into the hands of someone like Fenrir Greyback was too great to justify continuing research outside the controlled environment here at Hogwarts. Damocles returned to his laboratory and began his oversight of *your* Potions Mastery."

The old man paused. "I wish you to know, when Damocles sent me the Wolfsbane Potion formula just a few months before his passing, he also sent a letter to be given to you in the event your memories were ever recovered. It's in a safe in my office. I don't know its contents, but I can guess. As he said at the time, the events in the Shrieking Shack got your foot in the door, but your selection as his apprentice was entirely merit-based. Ironically, the only candidate to

seriously challenge you was Lily, but she withdrew from consideration after accepting James's marriage proposal."

Albus leaned forward. "Severus, Damocles Belby considered you the finest potioneer he'd ever mentored. And also the only one of his students who he thought might one day surpass him."

Snape nodded slowly. "And *that*, I suppose, was why you tasked me with brewing the *Unspeakable* Wolfsbane Potion. For Remus Lupin, I assume. After enjoying the pleasures of the Far East in mystical Shamballa, he has returned to Britain, no doubt to protect the Boy-Who-Lived. Is he close at hand?"

Albus nodded slowly. "He is. Do you ... wish to meet with him?" he asked almost hopefully.

"No!" Snape spat. "I ... I see nothing positive to gain from meeting him in person. I will continue to brew the Wolfsbane Potion. Indeed, I will improve upon it if I can. But *not* for Lupin's sake, nor even for yours. It was Damocles Belby who was my true mentor, the man who took a chance on me when I thought I had nothing to offer the world. I will honor him by continuing his work, and if it is possible so to do, someday, I *will* cure lycanthropy."

Albus beamed, and his eyes twinkled madly. The Slytherin noticed and sneered at him.

"Unless, of course, you *insist* on getting *mawkish* about what I just said. In which case, I shall likely forget myself and *poison Lupin to death during the next full moon!*"

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***Meanwhile, in the Caretaker's Office...***



It had been over an hour since Remus revealed the astonishing Secret that he and the odd new Caretaker, Malachi Sturgeon, were one and the same. Remus regaled his oldest friend with a description of his time in Shamballa and how he had returned to Hogwarts under a Fidelius both to protect Jim Potter from Sirius Black and to continue his training. Said training had progressed to Animagery lessons, apparently, and Remus was full of pride as he revealed that Jim would be taking the Animagus Potion the very next time there was a thunderstorm. Peter was delighted at the news and amazed at how quickly his godson had progressed in what had taken the Marauders several years, but Remus suddenly became pensive.

"Peter," he began. "Our time together as Marauders. What do you ... remember about it?"

"What do you mean?" Peter asked cautiously.

"When you and James ... and Sirius ... were studying to become Animagi, do ... do your memories of those days ... *make sense to you?*"

Peter's face looked grave. "You mean ... do I know my memories have been altered?" Remus's eyes widened as Pettigrew continued. "I've had Occlumency training as part of my Law Mastery. Can't be a good solicitor if you're revealing your client's secrets every time you look a Legilimens in the eye, after all. I've pieced together some details. Enough, I think. Someone, the Unspeakables I reckon, was experimenting on you. And we got drawn into it somehow and were taught Animagery by them so that we could help shepherd Moony and keep him out of trouble during the full moon."

It was a lie, albeit convincingly and earnestly told. Gus could not give the pass phrase to restore Peter's memories of Project Romulus because he himself had been Obliviated of the knowledge. But the Unspeakable-turned-Death Eater knew enough to give Peter a capsule summary after the younger man had been recruited into Mr. Nemo's cell. Peter had laughed uproariously when he realized that Sirius and James, who were both so proud of becoming "*illegal Animagi*" at such a young age, had actually received the best tutoring in the subject that could be had within the British Isles. Even the Marauder's Map had apparently been an indirect product of the Unspeakables.

"That's ... the short version of it," Remus said slowly. "I don't think I can reveal much more than that, though there's not much more to tell anyway. If it makes you feel better, you all did freely consent to the memory alterations. I also know the *true* details about *The Prank* ... or at least, what I was told after waking up the next morning. Snape knew the truth as well but then agreed to having his own memories altered."

Peter laughed ruefully. "In other words, he's probably hated you ever since even though you were perhaps the least culpable person involved in that whole sorry affair." He thought for a moment and then laughed even louder. "And I guess I knocked out two of Padfoot's teeth for nothing!"

"Not nothing, Peter. He deserved it, and I have never forgotten how you stood up to him on my behalf. If we'd all listened to you about Sirius back then, I think we'd have all been better off for it. When the bastard sent Snape to me, he surely expected the Monster to kill him. With the memory locks in place, he could not have known that I was in complete control of myself the whole time."

Peter did a double take. "... you *were*?!"

He looked dazed at the implications of that detail. "Remus, my friend, do you mean to say that ... that *whatever* was really going on and whoever was responsible for it ... that they *succeeded* in curing lycanthropy?!"

Remus chuckled. "Alas, no. All they ever achieved was a potion – one incredibly difficult and expensive to brew – that allowed me to retain most of my human intelligence while transformed. But it did nothing to cure the insanity that eventually claims all other werewolves except for myself. And so, the ... *researchers* hid the potion and its formula away forever. Well, not *quite* forever."

Remus looked almost smug. "I guess it's good to have friends in high places."

"Dumbledore," Peter said softly. "He brought you back to Hogwarts to look out for Jim and offered you access to this miracle potion for the duration."

Remus nodded. "I actually contacted him first. I was surprised to learn that he actually possessed a copy of the formula for the Wolfsbane Potion, but he did, and he promised to provide it for me during my stay."

"The *Wolfsbane* Potion?! What a dull name, though appropriate I suppose. Who's brewing it for you if it's that hard?"

The werewolf grinned. "Guess!"

Peter stared at him in confusion for a moment. Then, his eyes widened comically. "Get out! Not ... *Snivellus*?!" Remus nodded.

"I suppose I should ask you to refrain from calling him that given how I'm the beneficiary of his talents. Then again, from what I was told, I still assume his plan back in the day was to expose me as a werewolf and get me kicked out of Hogwarts ... or worse." His face darkened. "And ... Mary MacDonald was a friend."

Peter own face darkened as well at that memory. Even though they served the same master, Pettigrew had never regretted that anonymous tip of his that landed Mulciber in Azkaban. Thankfully, the swine was still there, having not been rescued by whoever the hell had freed Sirius Black and the others.

"Does he *know* that he's helping you?" Peter asked out of curiosity. "Your little Fidelius trick certainly fooled me, after all."

"He didn't before today," Remus answered pensively. "He apparently suffered some sort of psychic trauma happen last night and now remembers the truth about The Prank. Albus was ... undecided about what to tell him about everything else."

"I swear, Remus, if that ... *Death Eater* denies you this potion out of spite...!"

Remus shrugged. "We'll see what happens. He's actually been ... professional, if not actually nice, to Malachi Sturgeon. I've no idea how he would react to learning that my true identity was hidden behind a Fidelius."

Peter shoved his anger back down. Everyone who had ever crossed him and his *real* friends would get what they deserved eventually, but that was the future. Right now, he had other concerns.

"So, who *does* know the truth of your identity?" he asked.

"Albus, of course. He's the Secret Keeper. Jim and Lily both know. Harry knows my real name is Remus Lupin but not about," Remus sniffed disdainfully, "my *furry little problem*, as James used to call it."

"And Prongs himself *doesn't* know the truth?" Peter said with some surprise.

Remus's sneer was enough to tell Peter that the werewolf had still not forgiven James for what had happened back in 1981.

"So anyway," Peter said, changing the subject. "When's the next full moon? And does anyone stay with you for it?"

"Next week. And Albus will be there, as he insists on doing every month. *But* the following full moon is March 27, and he'll be gone that weekend for some big ICW meeting in Paris." He met Peter's gaze and knew instantly that the animagus had taken his meaning.

"So, would Mr. Wormtail like to come down to the Shrieking Shack next month and join Mr. Moony for the evening?" he asked.

"Why Mr. Moony!" Wormtail answered with a toothy grin. "I wouldn't miss it for the world!"

And Peter Pettigrew left the Caretaker's office happier than he'd been in quite a while. Almost *deliriously* happy.

Elsewhere in the castle, Harry Potter studied the Marauder's Map intently as the dot bearing Pettigrew's name left the Caretaker's Office.

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## THE PAST

A private booth at the Leaky Cauldron

17 January 1980

4:00 p.m.

As Albus Dumbledore gaped in amazement, the visibly intoxicated Sybil Trelawney slipped into a trance and uttered a True Prophecy that would reshape Wizarding Britain, while outside the door, a future Death Eater listened attentively.

But all that was happening at the Hogs Head Inn in Hogsmeade. And the events in that other bar were not *immediately* relevant to the two young men sitting at that exact same moment in the Leaky Cauldron in Diagon Alley, one of whom was *very* distraught.

"Calm down, Peter," James Potter said soothingly as he refilled Peter's glass of firewhiskey. While he still viewed Pettigrew as a close friend, he'd never been the most *courageous* of the Marauders in James's opinion. The two had not actually spoken since James and Lily's wedding due to the demands of James's Auror training, so he had no idea why Peter was so shaken and, in fact, tear-stricken.

"It's my Mum," he sobbed after downing another shot.  
"She's ... she's down with mumblemumps."

James fought down the urge to laugh. Mumblemumps was generally considered a children's disease, though occasionally some adults caught it. Although it occasionally caused dangerous respiratory and heart problems in older patients, it usually ran its course harmlessly with a week or so of bed rest. The biggest danger was embarrassment as the illness caused its victims to become prone to blurting out embarrassing secrets and be unable to lie, as if given a

heavily watered-down dose of Veritaserum (a potion which was, in fact, reverse-engineered centuries earlier from research into this condition).

"Peter, mumblemumps isn't serious *at all*. She'll probably be fine in a week or two. And if not, just take her to St. Mungo's. Certainly, it's nothing compared to all the other times she's been sick over the years...."

To James's shock, Peter slammed his hand on the table angrily.

"*My mother has never been sick!*" he snarled. "Earlier today, she had an episode where she blurted out the truth! All those years ... she was *never really sick!* She just ...." He paused, overcome, and rubbed his hands over his face.

"She just wanted *the attention*."

James stared at Peter in confusion and shock. Courageous or not, Peter had *always* been devoted to his mother and spent most of their school years in a state of constant agitation over her health issues. He'd invited Peter to Potter Manor many times, but the boy had never stayed for more than an afternoon because "*you know, Mum's sick and she might need me.*"

"Her own parents died during her last year of Hogwarts," Peter continued. "Then, my father died while I was three and left her a poor widow with a toddler to raise alone. There were no other Pettigrews, and the few surviving Gamps wanted nothing to do with her. So she ... she decided that if she acted *sick* all the time, she could use *guilt* to stop me from ever going away." His face darkened.

"No, from ever *getting* away!" he spat furiously.

"Peter, I ... I don't know what to say!"

"There's more," the young man, now barely twenty, said. "I ... I have *a vault*. All those years struggling to survive on her widow's dowry and ...."

He fixed James with a pleading desperate gaze. "I have an appointment tomorrow at 9:00 a.m. at Gringotts. They've confirmed the vault's existence and that I can claim it. But ...." He shook his head pitifully. "I don't know what's in there, James! I don't know if I can ...."

Peter sobbed again. "James, I know we haven't spent much time together since graduation. And maybe it's my fault." He knew that it wasn't but ignored that. "I know how busy you are with Auror training and with settling your parent's estate and with the wedding and, well, *dueling You-Know-Who in the middle of a Quidditch match*. But .... James, will you please come with me to Gringotts? I'd call on Remus, but he's off on the continent doing stuff for Dumbledore and ... I think I really need a friend with me."

James's mouth opened as he tried to think of an excuse. He wanted to be there for Peter, but he really did have a lot going on at the moment. But the misery on Wormtail's face overcame his resistance.

"Okay," he finally said. "I'll be there. And I'll call Sirius too. After you check out this vault, we can all go grab lunch and catch up on old times."

Then, he noticed something in Peter's expression that brought him up short. "It's ... not a problem to bring Sirius, is it?"

"No," Peter lied with a smile. "Of course not."

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### ***The next morning...***

To Peter's total non-surprise, Sirius did not even try to contain his annoyance at having to get up so early on his account. "Early" in this case meant 90 minutes *late*, as James and Sirius had gone out drinking the night before. James, at least, was cleaned up and fully alert (most likely Lily's doing), but Sirius seemed to have staggered out of bed and Apparated straight to the bank, pausing only long enough to throw on some wrinkled clothes and don some black sunglasses that he kept in place even while walking around in the dark underground tunnels. He'd actually thrown up on the wild cart-ride down to the vault. The goblin was not amused.

The mood did not improve when said goblin announced that the terms of the vault's acquisition specified that only Peter could go inside. He could remove whatever he wanted, but neither James nor Sirius could enter the vault alongside him.

"Well why the hell didn't you mention that before we got in that damnable cart?!" Sirius yelled before wincing in pain from his hangover.

"Because none of you wizards asked," the goblin said blandly.

James put his hands up to stop the brewing argument. "It's alright! Everybody, it's alright. Peter, I'm sorry, but it looks like you'll have to go in alone. But I promise, Sirius and I will be waiting. As will this charming goblin, I suppose." The creature sneered at Potter.

"Just go in and do what you need to do. Come back out here if you need to take a break and tell us what you've found. Whenever you're done, we'll go get some lunch and talk about it."

Peter nodded dumbly and walked through the heavy doors into the vault beyond. James couldn't see anything inside except for an inky blackness. Standard Gringotts privacy wards, he assumed.

"I am *not* staying down here all day, James," Sirius said firmly.

James did not respond to that comment. Instead, he changed the subject and lured his best friend into a protracted debate about the current Quidditch rankings. That kept them both occupied for nearly 45 minutes before a bored Sirius finally called out.

"Wormtail! Get your wormy tail moving! I'm ready to get out of here!"

"Sirius," James chided. "Calm down. I told you what he's going through."

"Yes, you did," Black snapped back. "And I'm not impressed. Has his mother ever Crucio'd him? No? Then, sorry, I am *not* impressed."

"Padfoot ...."

"Come on, James. I know he was your '*pet project*' all through school, but with everything going on in the world, we don't have *time* for weaklings we can't count on when things get tough. No matter how much it puffed up your ego to have someone like him to follow you around and suck up to you all the time and *reluctantly* (but not *too* reluctantly) accept expensive gifts you gave him."

"That's not fair, Sirius," James began, but Black cut him off.

"The hell it's not, Prongs. Friends grow apart after graduation. It just happens. But sometimes, what happens instead is ... you *outgrow* your friends. You are a Lord of the Wizengamot. We are both on our way to becoming Aurors. What place does Peter Pettigrew have in our lives beyond what you want to foist on him out of *pity*?"

James looked away in silence. They both completely ignored the goblin who seemed as bored with their interpersonal issues as with everything else about them.

"Honestly," James finally said. "I'm beginning to think you're just still holding a grudge from that time he knocked your teeth out."

Sirius snorted. "Please. He got lucky with a cheap shot. If he wants to start anything like that again, I'll kick his doughy, oversized posterior."

Despite himself, James laughed, as did Sirius. And over the sound of their own laughter, neither heard the sound of tiny padded feet scuttling away from the doorway. If the goblin heard it, he made no indication.

Less than a minute later, Peter came back outside.

"Finally!" Sirius exclaimed. "Are we done here?"

"You two are, at least," Peter said with exaggerated good cheer. "There's a lot of stuff in here. Nothing looks particularly valuable. Maybe a few hundred spare galleons, which is better than nothing. But no fortunes or artifacts. *However*, there are some personal effects handed down from my father's forebears. Journals and whatnot. Which means I can *finally* learn something about the Pettigrew side of the family."

"Sounds thrilling," Sirius drawled. James elbowed him sharply. Surprisingly, Peter smiled at the jab.

"Look, I'm grateful, more grateful than I can say, that you two came with me today. But there's no sense in you two staying any longer. I want to stick around and start going through some of this junk. But you two are busy men, and you can't come into the vault to help anyway. Why don't you both head on to lunch! James, I'll give you a Floo call next week, okay?"

"Well," James began uncertainly. "If you're sure...."

"He's sure!" Sirius said as he headed back towards the cart. "Come on, Prongs! Smell ya later, Wormtail!"

With exaggerated gallantry, he opened the door so James could get in first.

"*Sirius!*" Peter suddenly yelled out. The other Marauder turned back to him.

"Thank you," he said with genuine sincerity. Sirius blinked in puzzlement.

"What for?" he asked.

Peter stared at the two Marauders as if etching this moment into his memory forever.

"For your friendship," he finally said.

Sirius furrowed his brow at that and then shrugged before climbing into the cart. James, meanwhile, smiled back at Pettigrew and yelled back a reminder to call him later. Then, he gave a jaunty wave.

Peter simply raised his right hand and then slowly wriggled the fingers in a wave, still grinning with exaggerated cheer. As the cart took off, the smile melted away as if it had never been there at all. He turned and walked back into the vault without a backwards glance.

Once inside, he flicked his wand, and the doors closed and locked behind him. He slowly made his way back through the vault he'd only begun to explore. To one side were several chests, brimming with galleons. Probably not enough to truly impress Potter or Black, but certainly enough to have elevated Peter to their social circle if he'd had access to them back in the day. Nearby were several shelves full of ancient books. He'd not spent too much time with those – a few had leather covers that *might* have been bound in human skin, and he worried that they might be cursed against theft. He'd know their secrets soon though.

He moved on. Up ahead was a table filled with antique (but still functional) potions equipment including a silver cauldron, which Peter knew was needed only for the most difficult and dangerous potions. Another bookshelf was nearby. It seemed to be full of nothing but highly advanced potions texts, mostly in foreign tongues he did not speak. There was also a small wooden chest on a small table. He recognized it as an Amaranthine Coffin, a very expensive magical object that could keep potions and other perishable items (including magical items of limited duration) in stasis potentially forever. He opened the chest to find several racks of carefully labeled vials inside. As he looked through them idly, one vial containing a clear liquid caught his eye. He read the label carefully and then slid the vial inside his coat pocket.

On the far side of the vault, Peter found his destination. With another flick of his wand and a mumbled incantation,

he conjured a chair to sit on. Dropping down onto it in a state of mental exhaustion mixed with a strange and terrible hyperactivity, Peter raised his head.

High above was an ancient family crest mounted onto the vault wall, one weathered by centuries but undamaged and unbowed. Indeed, given its pedigree and what it had likely been through, Peter suspected that the crest might be indestructible to have survived this long. The escutcheon bore a white wolf rearing on its hind legs against a crimson background. Bisecting the wolf diagonally was a golden stripe, and on it, the image of black wand. It was a strange wand, not straight and smooth like Peter's own. Rather, there odd *bumps* regularly spaced along its length, largest at the base and growing smaller towards the tip. Above the wolf was a simple Latin motto: "*Solum Potentia.*"

Below the crest was a large magical portrait depicting an older man with white hair and a neatly trimmed beard. His eyes shone with a powerful intensity and a strange gleam as he looked down at Peter with intense interest. Peter's friends might have described it as "*rat-like*" for they had seen a similar gleam in his own eyes. Not often, though it would be seen more in the days to come.

In the background of the painting behind the man was a depiction of the same ancient crest that was hung above the painting in real life, demonstrating the connection between the two. The man himself wore a jet-black uniform with silvery buttons that hinted at Muggle design. It had white lightning bolt emblems on the collar, and skulls on the buttons. Most people would have called it sinister. Peter would have described it as *alluring*. There were medals on the man's chest that identified him as a high-ranking military officer of considerable importance. On his arm was a red armband marked with a black and white symbol: a

circle contained within a triangle and bisected by a vertical line.

The Deathly Hallows.

"They're gone, Grandfather," Peter said to the man in the portrait. "No one will bother us now."

He stared up expectantly at the portrait of his father's father. Gustav Kleinwuchs. The Butcher of Silesia. Der Todeswolf. The Left Hand of Grindelwald.

Or George Pettigrew, as it had said on the forged documents that got the man and his only surviving son into Britain in 1946.

"Tell me more," Peter asked almost hungrily. "Tell me ... *everything*."

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***That night at the Pettigrew residence...***

It was dark when Peter returned to the cottage in Upper Appleby that he'd shared with his mother, Edwina Pettigrew, for nearly his entire life. Almost instantly as he entered, he could hear the woman calling for him.

"Peter! Peter! Is that you? I hope so! To think of it, leaving an old dying woman all alone all day! Do you not love me at all?!"

Peter sighed and closed his eyes. The "old dying woman" had just turned forty-nine a few months earlier. She'd been twenty-nine when she married Martin Pettigrew, older than the typical "blushing bride" in Wizarding Britain, but hardly a spinster. And as for dying ....

He made his way to her bedroom and knocked gently before entering.

"It's me, Mother. Peter. Of course, I love you. I just had business to take care of. And besides, you needed rest more than me pestering you."

Edwina clucked her tongue disapprovingly. "Leaving me all alone! I could have *starved to death* and no one would have cared!"

Peter fought the urge to roll his eyes. His mother had been overweight for as long as he could remember, and the dirty dishes and empty delivery cartons from the nearby wizarding pub indicated that she had not suffered very much from hunger while he was gone.

"Would you like some tea?" he asked gently.

"Oh, very well," she grumbled. "But be careful! You don't want to drop the teapot and shatter it again like that one time!"

"That was in 1972, Mother. Just the one time."

The witch wrinkled her nose. "Well, you're probably due for another bout of clumsiness."

He did not rise to the comment. Instead, he quietly left the room and went to the kitchen to put the kettle on. Ten minutes later, he returned to his mother's room with a tea tray and two cups. Edwina Pettigrew took her tea with milk and two sugars. Peter Pettigrew took his plain. Tonight, anyway.

They drank in silence for several minutes, the witch in her bed, bundled up in a nightgown, shawl, and goffered cap



more appropriate to a witch forty years her senior. Peter sat in a chair next to the bed.

"You look better this evening, Mother. Has your fever gone down?"

Edwina grimaced slightly as she took a sip of tea. "Perhaps. Though I feel worse than ever." She took another sip.

"Where did you go that had you gone all day?"

"Gringotts," he said without taking his eyes off the woman. "I went to see Father's vault."

The woman gasped and nearly dropped the cup.

"Careful, Mother. Don't spill your tea."

Something in Peter's tone caused Edwina to look at him almost fearfully.

"H-h-how did you know about the vault?"

He took another sip before answering. "Why, you told me of course! You had an episode yesterday while in the throes of your terrible illness and blurted out that Father had left a vault when he died."

"Did I?" she replied nervously. "I don't remember. What did you find there? I was not allowed after Martin died. It was for Pettigrew men only, I suppose."

"*Not true,*" Peter thought. "*Martin Pettigrew's daughter would have been allowed to enter. Only those who marry into the family are excluded. Like you.*"

"There wasn't much worth mentioning," he said aloud.

"Though there was a portrait of Grandfather there. He was

very informative."

At that remark, Edwina's nervousness blossomed into terror. She took another deep sip of tea, though it sloshed out onto the saucer due to her trembling when she put the cup down.

"Mother, I've had a very trying day." He chuckled. "Come to think of it, I've had a very trying ... life. So, I would be very grateful if you would answer one simple yes or no question for me."

She nodded silently.

"Okay, here goes. Did you kill my father?"

"Y-y-y-yes," she stammered, seemingly shocked at hearing her own reply.

Peter smiled warmly. "Good. That wasn't so hard, was it? Next question: *Why* did you kill my father?"

Edwina swallowed painfully. "Because it was him or me. Your grandfather died when you were only two, but he'd been in decline for years. Injuries from the war, he'd said." She barked out a laugh. "Only he never said whose side he was on!"

Peter said nothing. He just looked at his mother expectantly.

"Martin thought I was out shopping, but I got home early. He was in his father's room. They were talking." Her eyes flashed. "I heard *everything!* Your father *never* loved me. He only married me because he thought my family was *rich*. That and because he thought I was so sickly, I'd die soon. Die and leave him all my money and you to raise."

She leaned towards Peter with a wild look in her eyes. "In fact, they had both expected me to die during *childbirth*! How does that make you *feel*, Peter, to know that your father sired you to use as a murder weapon against your own mother?!"

He just looked at her without reaction. "I'm not sure, Mother. I imagine I'll spend some time later examining my feelings on the topic. So, Father and Grandfather knew you were a Gamp and, what, thought they could reactivate the seat before it was extinguished?"

"They thought so anyway," she spat. "But Martin misunderstood how the Gamp Charter worked. To claim the Gamp Lordship, one can be male or female. You can even have a different last name. But you must have two wizarding parents and *four* wizarding grandparents, the minimum standard of Purebloodedness."

Peter's forehead wrinkled. "But ... I *do* have four wizarding grandparents."

Edwina cackled almost drunkenly. "That's the funny part. You *know* who your grandfather *really* is, don't you?" Peter nodded slowly.

"Well, your father's parents were both Purebloods. *But* when *Gustav* brought his son to Great Britain under an assumed name, the *forged papers* he acquired said that he was a Half-blood and that Martin's dead mother was a Muggle! And because of that forgery, Gustav had no *proof* of Martin's Pureblood heritage or yours! To think, one of Grindelwald's top supporters, living in Britain disguised as a *blood-traitor* with a Half-blood son!"

She laughed again but then shook her head as if dizzy. Before she could think about it too much, Peter spoke again.

"So, to recap: Father married you because he thought you were a sickly rich heiress when in fact you were neither."

Edwina glared at her son. "I heard them talking. About you. About me. Even as your grandfather was on his death bed, he was still scheming. Martin would make sure that you were '*trained in the family's ways*' and see that you married a true Pureblood. Then, *your* child would become the future Lord or Lady Gamp, *and a descendent of the Butcher of Silesia would sit on the Wizengamot!*"

She sniffed disdainfully. "Of course, *I* would have to be '*put out of the way first,*' lest I interfere with their plans for *you!* But I showed them, didn't I. I showed them both!"

Peter's eyebrows shot up in surprise. Both?!

"Please proceed, Mother. Tell me everything."

"Your grandfather was already dying, but I sped things along. I may not have gotten an O on my Potions NEWTs, but I did pass them. He always kept a glass of water on his bedside table in case he woke up thirsty in the night. A few drops of Essence of Foxglove added to it and he was dead before morning. But I couldn't poison Martin. He wasn't an old man weak from war injuries, and poisons can be traced!"

Pettigrew nodded for her to continue.

"Martin was working towards a Potions Mastery at the time and was working on the side in an apothecary's shop in Little Appleby. Since he couldn't go directly to the

Wizengamot, he'd planned to become a Healer eventually. I visited him in the shop one day with you along in your pram. I knew what I had to do."

She reached out with her hand, but Peter made no move to take it. "I had to kill him. Or else he'd have killed me! But more than that, I had to kill him so that *he didn't raise you to become a monster like him and his father!* It was all *for you*, Peter! You must believe me!"

"I believe you, Mother," he lied with perfect sincerity. "I know how much you loved your son. What did you do next?"

"I got him to talk about what he was working on. Then, I went home and researched it. A few days later, I returned with you. And while he was playing with you, showing his little boy around the shop, I ... I sabotaged the potion so that it would explode violently on the last step. Later that night, the Aurors came to tell me that there had been an accident and Martin was dead. I cried like I was supposed to, even though I wanted to laugh. But most of all, I was so *relieved*. A mass murderer and his aspiring murder son, both sent to hell where they would never harm anyone else again."

Peter sat quietly as he absorbed her answers. "And then, you set yourself to raising *me*. You know ... the way you did."

She shook her head and started to weep. "I know you think I'm a terrible mother for the way I raised you, Peter, but it was for your own good. I couldn't let you grow up like Martin wanted - to grow up *evil*! Power only leads to corruption. I had to keep you *weak* so you would stay good!"

"There is no good, Mother," he said calmly. "There is no evil. There is only Power."

She stared at him quizzically as if unable to understand his words. Then, her eyes widened as she realized not only what he said, but what *she* had been saying. With a sob, she threw her cup across the room. It shattered against the wall.

"What was in that tea?!" she shouted.

"It was only tea, Mother," Peter replied reassuringly. "I sat here and drank it alongside you. I did not put anything at all in your tea."

Edwina closed her eyes and sighed in relief. Peter finished the last of his own tea before setting the cup aside.

"The milk, on the other hand? That had a wee bit of Veritaserum in it. Not even a full drop, but with the mumblemumps, enough to get you to answer my questions. Oh, and roughly half a Calming Draught. You seem *tense* and *anxious*. I wanted to help you get some rest."

The witch's eyes shot open and she glared at her son in betrayal.

"Peter, how could you?! In my condition, Veritaserum could *kill me!* Are you so ungrateful that you would poison your own mother?!"

He reached over and took her hand in his own and then began patting it gently with his other hand to calm her nerves.

"Of course not, Mother. As I said, it was not even a full drop. I would never hurt you that way. Not ever. You're *my mother*. And while I'm ... disappointed to learn what you did to my father and my grandfather, I understand it was done out of *love*. You killed them both because you *love* me. And after everything you've done for me, after how you raised me alone, struggling through poverty and with your ... *condition*, I would *never* poison you. Please, believe that."

Edwina put her other hand over Peter's, clasping it tightly.

"Oh, Peter, I do love you. And I'm proud of what a fine loving son you've grown up to be."

They said nothing else. They simply held each other hands until, finally, the Calming Draught kicked in and Edwina Pettigrew drifted off to sleep. Peter gently brushed the fringe of her hair aside before leaning over to kiss the sleeping woman on the forehead.

And then, he grabbed the woman's pillow, yanked it out violently from under her head, and slammed it onto her face. She woke up instantly and started pulling at his hands with her own to no avail.

"I would never poison you, Mother," he said impassively. "Poisons can be traced."

After a moment or so, her struggles grew weaker and weaker until they ceased altogether. He held the pillow in place for a while longer to be sure before pulling it away. Edwina Pettigrew was dead, but her eyes were still open, still glaring up at Peter as if in accusation.

He reached out carefully with his hand and closed those judging eyes. They had no power to instill guilt within him anymore. Then, a movement out of the corner of his eye

caused him to turn towards the far wall. It was his own reflection in the mirror atop her vanity table that had caught his attention, and he was startled by his own appearance. His eyes *gleamed* with a terrible *rat-like* intensity and his face was lit up by an infectious grin of manic joy. The joy that only comes from *true freedom*.

Peter Pettigrew had never felt so alive.

## Chapter End Notes

AN1: SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT: As noted in the Author Notes for the last chapter, I will be taking a brief hiatus from posting here. Chapter 121 of POS will not appear before Jan 1. This is for 2 reasons. First, I have decided to use NaMoWriMo as an opportunity to get Strangers In Dallas, the sequel to Strangers In Boston done. Or at the very least, well begun. Second, believe it or not, we are rather near the end of Year 3, about 5-6 more chapters, I think. However, because of the nature of several of those chapters, I need to have them all done before I start publishing them. I can't explain why without spoilers. You'll understand, I hope, when they appear. So, expect Chapter 121 on January 1st. Or maybe a few days thereafter, depending on how good a time I have on New Year's the bright side, the rest of DEM should follow very quickly thereafter.

Discord followers will still get access to advance previews of 121 and subsequent chapters with the understanding that some of the published "chunks" as I like to call them may not be in the write order when previewed. I thank you all for your patience.

AN2: Speaking of which, check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes



page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P\*\*\*\*\*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN3 (What the Sinister Man is reading): Regrettably, nothing new on the HP front. I'm pretty much buried under work and SID.

AN4: Special thanks to my Discord editors: Adam Sitrich, feauxen, General Burns, HeidiWolf, INSTICNT\_Klutz, Luc, Mr. Gift, nik, Prince of Conspiracy, ProgKingHughesker, Sielk, and Tesselacta.

# Conspiracies in Action

## Chapter Notes

### SHAMELESS PLUG!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic.

### ***Harry Potter and the Death Eater Menace***

***Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.***

### ***Chapter 37: Conspiracies in Action***

It was a dark and stormy night when the Death Eaters met in a dingy shack to make their plans and plot their crimes against the innocent wizards and witches of Britain. A dirty calendar on the wall indicated that it was in May of 1979, though the exact day was unmarked. In attendance were the three Lestranges, Lucius Malfoy (who was gagged and tied to a chair), and a hooded figure whose identity was as yet unrevealed.

"Are we ready to begin, Mr. Proteus?" sneered Bellatrix who looked young and vital, much different than the hollowed-out form that more than a decade in Azkaban would later inflict upon her. "We don't have much time if we're to get this fool back before he's missed!"

The concealed figure threw back his hood to reveal himself as *Sirius Black*. "Patience, Miss Demeanor. I'm quite good at what I do. I'll have poor little Luci bound to the Dark Lord's will in no time. **IMPERIO!**"

The spell enveloped Malfoy, who fought valiantly but was unable to resist the Unforgiveable. His face went slack and his eyes glassy.

"You will return to your father, Abraxas Malfoy," Sirius intoned. "You will apologize to him for your earlier defiance and refusal to take the Dark Mark. You will beg for the chance to join the Death Eaters. You will also agree with his demand that you marry Narcissa Black despite your disgust over her own loyalty to the Dark Lord."

Lucius nodded dumbly and then rose and left the shack.

"Well done ... *Sirius Black!*" Bellatrix said sarcastically. "Or should I say, *Marcellus Frump!*"

Sirius shook his head wildly, and in a blur, his entire face changed to that of a nondescript man with brown hair and eyes. "You're too kind, Bellatrix."

"But why the deception, Marcellus?" Rodolphus said slowly. "Why disguise yourself as Sirius Black!"

"Abraxas warned that his son has some degree of Occlumency training," Marcellus explained. "As do several others among the list of individuals our Lord has charged

me with convert. It is possible that one of them might be able to break through my Imperius Curse. In which case, he would remember only that the blood traitor Sirius Black was the one who cursed him. Even a failed effort will spread dissension and misinformation among our enemies if someone so strongly opposed to the Dark Lord could become a Death Eater."

The other three laughed cruelly at his words.

"So, who's next on our list?" Bellatrix said with a laugh. "Who is the next person for my *dear cousin* Sirius to claim as a new Death Eater."

There was a pause. Then, after a few seconds, Bellatrix and "Marcellus" looked at Rabastan expectantly.

"Huh?" he said with a start. "Oh, it's ... um, Gregory Goyle!"

""CUT!" Rufus Scrimgeour bellowed angrily from a few feet away. There was a shimmer as his array of Notice-Me-Not and Disillusionment Charms evaporated to reveal the leonine wizard. He was sitting behind a small table upon which sat a script book containing all the dialogue that had just been recited. "For Merlin's sake, keep your head in the game, Lucius!"

At that, Lucius reentered the shack, the Charm that caused him to appear as young as he did in 1979 fading away with a flick of his wand. At the same time, the three Lestranges also returned to their 1994 appearances.

"Don't lecture me, old man!" Lucius said angrily. "Do you have *any idea* how hard it is to maintain two Imperius curses and four Youth-Reviving Charms while also *acting*?!"

"Please," Rufus sneered. "You were *acting* like an Imperius victim. You barely had any lines!"

Realizing that there would be a break while Rufus and Lucius argued, Marcellus Frump sighed loudly and shook his head again. Instantly, his features shifted and blurred once more until he resumed the true visage of Regulus Black.

"That is hardly the point!" Malfoy snarled. "*You* drafted me into this absurd bit of thespianism, Rufus, because of your blithe insistence that I was the only member of our conspiracy who could maintain control over the Lestrangle imbeciles. Do not dismiss the difficulties I face in using the Imperius under these circumstances!"

"I wouldn't dream of it, Lucius," Rufus drawled with exaggerated disinterest. "I would never presume to be as knowledgeable about the Unforgiveable Curses as you. *I've* only used the Killing Curse three times, after all."

At that, Lucius audibly growled, and his hand tightened on his wand. Startled, Reg noticed for the first time how haggard Malfoy looked, and he stepped between the two wizards with his hands raised to placate them.

"Enough! We're all on the same team! Lucius, put away your wand. Rufus, stop being a prat. Let's just all take a little break to clear our heads."

Lucius nodded slowly without taking his eyes off Scrimgeour who merely crooked an eyebrow at him. Off to the side, there was a nervous cough followed by a hesitant question.

"Um, sorry to interrupt," said the man who had been Rabastan Lestrangle, "but ... who are all you people?"

"As the man said," Lucius spat, "take five – ***STUPEFY!***" There was a flash of red from Malfoy's wand and both Rabastan and Rodolphus fell to the floor. Lucius then stormed out the door, followed by Reg, Bella, and Rufus.

"Out," in this case, was perhaps an inaccurate way of putting it, for the dingy old shack where the scene had been staged was actually situated in the grand ballroom of Longbottom Manor. About twenty feet away from the shack was another table, both larger and more formal, where Hoskins was setting up afternoon tea. Augusta Longbottom was already seated as the group approached.

"Well?" the Longbottom Regent inquired. "How is our little foray into the dramatic arts progressing? Is this mad scheme going to work?"

"To soon to tell," Rufus answered while pouring himself a cup of tea (to which he added a shot of whiskey from a flask in his pocket). "We've already accumulated an hour or so of useful memories, but that's only been the easy part. We have our '*Marcellus Frump*' cast." He paused. "By the way, Regulus, just to set my mind at ease – whose face are you using for Frump? Please tell me it's not another poxied Muggle film star that any Muggleborn would recognize in an instant."

"No, no," the Metamorphmagus reassured everyone. "It's a complete nobody. I took a weekend trip to the south of France, found a Muggle factory worker who looked the part, got him intoxicated, and then shaved his head – which he thinks he did voluntarily after losing a drunken bar bet on the Juventus-Real Madrid match."

The assembled Purebloods just stared at him.

"They're Muggle football clubs ... it's a sporting ... you know what, never mind. The point is, I have roughly a thousand hairs from this bloke if we need to use Polyjuice for someone to pose as him and pretend to be the Death Eater Mr. Proteus aka Marcellus Frump."

"Alright, Regulus," Rufus declared. "We'll trust to your competencies. But the next phase will be far more complicated. Where are we on getting hairs from the various Death Eaters that Sirius Black was supposed to have suborned." He looked around. "For that matter, where *is* Sirius?"

"At Grimmauld Place," Bellatrix said while buttering a scone. "Resting. His health is still an issue. He needs more advanced healing than any of us can provide."

"As for the hairs," Lucius added, "I have reservations about that aspect of the plan. The loyalty that Crabbe, Goyle, and Parkinson have for me is ... dubious at the moment, and I am at a loss as to how to secure *hair* from any of them in a way that will not draw unhealthy attention to our scheme. And my influence over the other pardoned Death Eaters is nonexistent. Too many of them have fallen under the sway of either Tiberius Nott or House Selwyn."

"Well then, I suppose someone will have to Polyjuice himself to look like Frump while Regulus assumes the form of the targeted Death Eater."

"That may cause problems later, Rufus," Regulus said. "If there are inconsistencies in the performances of different people playing Frump, are there any DMLE investigators who might spot them?"

"We'll just have to risk it," Rufus said testily. "Fate has blessed us by giving our conspiracy *one* Metamorphmagus."

It's not like we can go out shopping for a second one!"

A brief silence descended on the group before Augusta spoke.

"Well, actually ...."

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***20 February 1994***  
***Longbottom Manor***

Nymphadora Tonks tried in vain to keep an expression of awe off her face as she sat between her mother and father on a couch that probably cost more than she'd make in a year as a rookie Auror. Assuming, of course, that the girl would ever actually become an Auror in light of her family's present circumstances. Her parents were less awestruck by Longbottom Manor. Ted's family had been rather well-off Muggles, and he'd been to the homes of the upper-class before. Andromeda, on the other hand, had been a Black and was raised in a home every bit as opulent as this one.

They'd received the invitation to visit Lady Augusta Longbottom the day before, and at the time, it had been a godsend. As Andromeda had feared, concerns about the Tonkses' connections to both the escaped Death Eaters and to the Outcast Theo No-Name had made getting work for any of them impossible, and the family's savings had been nearly exhausted when they received Augusta's owl. The *precise nature* of the "job opportunity" Augusta wished to propose was vague to an extent that Andromeda found troubling. But now that the younger Tonks knew about "*the Black Madness*," her mother's tendency towards paranoia made more sense.

Of course, just because one is paranoid doesn't mean one shouldn't be wary, but under the circumstances, the family



was willing to ignore that sentiment.

Lady Augusta was perfectly welcoming and amiable throughout their luncheon. She did not turn to matters of business until after everyone had eaten.

"I have asked you here for an offer of employment," she began, "on account of a very dear friend who requires ongoing medical treatment. Unfortunately, however, St. Mungo's is not an option as my friend's condition ... well, let's just say it would cause considerable family embarrassment and leave it at that. During his treatment and convalescence, your family would be provided with generous pay and benefits, including lodgings for the duration."

She then quoted a payment figure that all three initially thought was a bit low until Augusta clarified that it was a weekly salary rather than a monthly one, at which point Ted nearly choked on his tea.

"Unfortunately, due to the extremely sensitive nature of my friend's situation, I cannot reveal anything more until you have sworn an Unbreakable Vow never to reveal anything about your work for us should you accept the position or anything about this conversation if you decline once you have heard all the details."

Nymphadora raised her hand. "Um, Lady Augusta, I'm not a healer. Why did you ask me to come along for this?"

Augusta took a sip of tea before answering delicately. "Well, my dear. My understanding is that your Ministry career is ... *stalled* shall we say, due to the present political situation. However, you have done good work in the past when you briefly tutored my grandson the summer before last. And

both Harry Potter and Alastor Moody gave you the *highest* recommendations."

The old woman batted her eyes innocently. "I'm sure we can come up with *something* for you to do," she said sweetly.

After a brief family discussion, all three of the Tonkses swore the requested oath, at which point Augusta summoned her house elf. "Show them in, Hoskins."

The elf popped away, and seconds later, the doors to the parlor slide open ... and Regulus, Bellatrix, and Sirius entered the room. Sirius was in a wheelchair at Reg's insistence and much to his own chagrin. All of the Tonkses reacted with predictable outrage, and Nymphadora actually produced a wand and was about to open fire on the three newcomers when Andromeda pulled her arm aside.

"No, Dora! Remember your Vow! Strike at them now and you risk losing your magic!"

Nevertheless, all three of them had pulled their wands out and assumed a defensive position while Augusta continued to sip her tea as if disinterested in the potential for violence. Sirius spoke up.

"I'm sorry that an Unbreakable Vow was needed, Andi, but I'm sure you understand why. Perhaps we should start things off with either your or your husband examining our arms ... to confirm that *none* of us carry the Dark Mark."

It was at that point that Nymphadora finally noticed that Bellatrix had worn a dress that exposed her arms, while both Sirius and Regulus (who she knew only from old pictures) had entered the room with their sleeves already rolled up.

"Impossible!" Ted exclaimed. "It's some kind of trick!"

Then, Augusta noticed that only three of her conspirators had entered the parlor. "Hold on, Healer Tonks. Sirius, where is Rufus? I expect he can provide our new friends with some reassurances."

"Sorry, sorry," Rufus said slightly out of breath as he entered behind the three Blacks. "Your introductory meeting was taking forever, and I had to go to the loo. I'm an old man, after all."

He turned his attention to Nymphadora. "Ah! Auror-Trainee Tonks! So nice to see you again. I hope you still recognize the man who swore you in on your first day at the Academy."

Nymphadora was too shocked at Rufus Scrimgeour's presence next to a pair of convicted Death Eaters (or at the very least, a pair of people convicted of being Death Eaters).

"Will someone tell me WHAT IN MERLIN'S NAME IS GOING ON?!" Andromeda finally yelled in frustration.

Sirius wheeled his chair forward. "We'd be happy to, Andi. Believe me, it's one *hell* of a story!"

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**22 February 1994**

**2:00 a.m.**

***A private room in The Boar's Tusk  
Knockturn Alley***

Lucius Malfoy fought down a sneer as the man across the table dumped 200 galleons out of a coin purse and began to count them. Few people would dare to insult House Malfoy

by actually *counting* money in front of its Lord, but this was Knockturn Alley. There was little honor to be found here, and so he could not begrudge the sweaty seedy little man before him his distrust.

After a few moments, Mundungus Fletcher looked up from his counting and offered a toothy grin (well, fairly toothy – the reprobate was missing a few).

"All seems to be here, guv'nor," he said. "So what d'ye want ole Dung to do for ya that costs this much gold?"

"First things, first, Fletcher," Lucius answered silkily. "You will swear an oath of secrecy not to reveal anything about our discussions? And you will agree to accept a Memory Lock upon completion of your task?"

"Well, o'course!" Mundungus said amiably.

Whatever Malfoy wanted, it was no doubt highly illegal, so Dung was happy to know nothing about it after the deed was done. He'd been surprised when Lucius contacted him out of the blue. The Pureblood had made use of Mundungus Fletcher's peculiar skill set often in the past, but he usually handled all their dealings through intermediaries. He and Malfoy hadn't met face to face since before You-Know-Who fell, when Malfoy had used the criminal as a conduit for anonymously sending information to the Order of the Phoenix. And wouldn't *those* stuck up wankers have a fit if they'd known the source of Fletcher's juiciest insider knowledge.

Fletcher took the oath. Satisfied, Malfoy reached into a bag and withdrew a brown file folder and a scrap of paper, both of which he handed over.

"Your task should not be difficult given your admirable skills as a forger, Mr. Fletcher. You are being paid at a higher rate for speed, discretion, and *perfection*. Within a week, I require that folder returned to me with the name on that paper inscribed on it using the proper format for DMLE case files. The folder should be aged to approximately thirteen years and five months, though a leeway of one month either way is acceptable."

Dung glanced at the name on the paper. "Marcellus Frump. Anyone I should know?"

"Would it matter if it was?"

The criminal shrugged. "Not really. Discretion and perfection, after all. What sorta documents do you want me to fiddle up to put *in* the folder?"

"None," Lucius answered. "I only require the folder properly labeled and aged. But it must survive any doubts as to the folder's age and provenance."

Fletcher blinked. "You ... are payin' me 200 galleons for an empty file folder that will appear to be thirteen years or so older than it actually is? And then, you want to Obliviate me afterwards?" He shook his head. "You rich toffs is weird."

"My dear Mr. Fletcher," Lucius replied languidly. "You have *no idea*."

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**3 March 1994**

***The private Wizengamot chamber of Cassilda Selwyn  
Seneschal and Proxy for the House of Selwyn***

"Thank you for meeting with me, Seneschal," said Dolores Umbridge cautiously. True, she'd been a Slytherin back in

the day, but *intrigue* had never been her strong suit.

"Not at all, Madam Umbridge," Cassilda answered. "House Selwyn is always eager to aid the Fudge Administration in its pursuits. How may I assist the Ministry today?"

"Well, the thing of it is," Dolores continued while trying not to stammer, "I'm not actually here on Ministry business. It's more of a personal matter."

"Oh? Do go on."

Dolores took a deep breath. "My father, Orford Umbridge, passed away a few months ago – the result of long-term spell damage he suffered before I was born. While going through his effects, I found some letters and diary notes that spoke of the ... deep affection between him and a member of your family: Ardella Selwyn. Of course, she died some time before you were born, so perhaps you're not familiar with the name."

"I am," replied Cassilda with a silky voice that carried only barest hint of steel. "All Selwyn children are schooled in our genealogy. But please, continue."

"Well, from these documents, it seems that my father and the late Ardella had spoken of marriage, though, of course, the class division that separated a daughter of House Selwyn from an untitled name such as Umbridge must have seemed insurmountable. I imagine that's why they broke up upon graduating Hogwarts. Still, out of respect for my father's feelings ... as recorded in the documents I spoke of ... I should like to visit Ardella Selwyn's final resting place and, on behalf of my father, pay my respects."

"How oddly romantic, Madam Umbridge. However, I must regretfully inform you that Ardella Selwyn was cremated

and her ashes spread across the grounds of our ancestral home as per our family traditions."

Dolores was visibly disappointed by the news, a fact Cassilda noticed and almost smiled over.

"*But* I do find this information intriguing, Madam Umbridge, and would know more about these star-crossed lovers. Perchance do you have these letters with you?"

"I'm afraid not," Dolores answered. "To be honest, I've been wavering on whether or not to simply burn them. That seems as though it should be the proper thing to do with personal effects of such a nature, but I thought it would be best to wait until I knew more. That was such an important time in my father's life, after all."

She paused before continuing. "Tell me, Seneschal, if it's not impertinent of me to ask – How *did* Ardella Selwyn die?"

"Oh, I'm sure I've no idea, Madam Umbridge. As you noted, it was quite a bit before my time. Who knows – perhaps it was of a broken heart?"

Dolores was silent for several seconds. "Perhaps. Oh well, I suppose this has been a bit of a dead end in ... settling accounts for my father. But I thank you anyway for the information you've provided."

She rose and bowed respectfully before leaving the office. As she passed out the door, Cassilda's charming smile twisted into a smirk.

"*Oh Madam Umbridge,*" she thought to herself. "*I wonder if you have any idea of what kind of fire you're playing with.*"

Once outside, Dolores leaned against a wall while her heart rate slowed back to normal. Truthfully, she'd not known what information might be obtained from Cassilda Selwyn. Nor what sort of horrible vengeance she might have stupidly brought down on herself by meeting with such a formidable woman for a fishing expedition. There were, of course, no love letters among Orford's effects that would prove or even suggest that Dolores was a daughter of House Selwyn. Her hope had been arranging a visit to Ardella's gravesite, as she'd found a spell that could confirm familial connections from nearby human remains even if decades old and six-feet-under. She'd purchased the slightly illegal spell from Gringotts – the goblin bank had been unable to trace Dolores's maternity since her birth had apparently taken place in a Muggle hospital and not recorded magically. If Ardella's body had truly been cremated, there was no way now to establish Dolores's relationship with House Selwyn.

Assuming she even wanted to, given what she'd learned about her birth mother's family.

Officially, House Selwyn was beyond reproach. It was a benefactor to half the shops in Diagon Alley and was the largest single contributor to St. Mungo's. The only black mark against the house was a brief period in the 1970's when Berith Selwyn, Cassilda's older brother, had joined the Death Eaters in secret and then used the Imperius Curse to force several family members into joining as well. The main reason that someone as young as Cassilda could rise to the position of House Seneschal was that she had been educated abroad and was too young to have ever been under Berith's influence.

*Unofficially*, rumors had flown about the Selwyns for as long as Dolores had been alive. That Berith took the fall for



family members who were perfectly willing to serve You Know Who. That the family was steeped in the darkest arts. That in centuries past, it had generated *Dark Lords* whose names the family had erased from the history books to preserve its reputation. Dolores didn't know how much of that was true, but she was now more certain than ever that House Selwyn played some role in her mother's death, her father's lifelong curse, and her own wretched childhood.

And somehow, she would make them pay.

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***4 March 1994***

***The Department of Magical Law Enforcement  
Records Division  
2:00 a.m.***

Joseph Abbot whistled softly as he made his way through the DMLE. Everyone on the late shift knew the amiable old janitor, a squib from the line of Abbot. No one knew why the Abbots pulled strings to get the squib a menial job at the Ministry instead of banishing him like most families did with their squibs (or *worse* than banishment like a few families did). But he did his job well and without complaint, that job being serving as a house elf for those parts of the Ministry where house elves were not permitted to go.

While the DMLE had a "late shift," no one worked in Records after hours. Joseph dutifully made his way around the few late-nighters, emptying their garbage cans as needed and making idle chit-chat. Then, he casually entered the Closed File room. He took a moment to empty the two trash cans he found inside. With a furtive glance at the door, Joseph made his way swiftly into the stacks of closed files. After a quick search, he found what he was looking for. From inside his shirt, he produced a battered

old (and empty) file folder bearing the name "Marcellus Frump" which he carefully placed on a shelf between the files for Leonidas Franklin and Hazel Fyfe.

His mission complete, Joseph exited the DMLE and returned to the custodian's closet where the *real* Joseph Abbot was waiting, unconscious and stripped to his underwear. With a quick full-body shudder, Regulus Black abandoned the squib's form for his own. Then, he redressed Joseph in his janitor's uniform and altered his memories to believe that he'd completed his rounds without incident before sneaking back here for a catnap.

After swapping out his normal face for a nondescript one, Regulus left the Ministry and apparated back home where he sent word of his success to the other members of his cabal. It had been a productive night.

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**7 March 1994**

***Excerpts from two letters both written by Eleanor Burke to different patrons ...***

*Mr. Scrimgeour -*

*You asked me to discreetly make a copy of the 1981 Marcellus Frump file, but it was the oddest thing! The file was still on the shelf, but it was empty! I'm sorry I couldn't be of more assistance, but if you let me know some more about Frump's case, I'll see what I can dig up elsewhere.*

*Eleanor Burke*

*Rita dear,*

*What do you know about someone by the name of Marcellus Frump. A Death Eater, apparently, but I've never*

*heard of him. All I know was that he was arrested right around the time that You-Know-Who fell, but his entire file was snatched out of its folder sometime in 1981! Granted, security was lax then, but still! Is this something you might wish for me to investigate? You know the usual rates.*

*Ellie*

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**10 March 1994**  
***The Potions Classroom***

**"LEGILIMENS"**

Once more, Harry pushed his will against that of Severus Snape. With each new lesson since Harry began Legilimency training, Snape had continuously increased the strength of the traps present in the false memory palace he'd constructed for these lessons. The Potions Master had been complimentary (for him, anyway) of Harry's growing skills, but despite his best efforts, Harry had thus far been unable to remain inside Snape's mind for more than a few moments, let alone move beyond the false memory palace to the true one concealed elsewhere in the man's mindscape.

As he uttered the incantation, Harry focused on Snape's eyes and felt his own mind pass through them as he deftly bypassed the outer defenses. In an instant, he was in a familiar location – the bedroom of Hubert Turnipseed, a fictitious Hufflepuff Fifth Year that Snape had created as a false staging area for Legilimency training. Harry glanced around. There was a tabby cat lying on the bed that represented the first level of Snape's Occlumency defensive suite.

Swiftly, Harry whispered a spell. "**MARIPOSA**" In response, a butterfly materialized a few feet above the cat just out of its reach. The cat growled loudly but focused its attention on catching the butterfly instead of Harry, leaving the boy a few minutes to study the room more thoroughly. Everything in the room itself seemed prosaic and utterly appropriate for "a generic teenaged Hufflepuff," so Harry turned his attention to the two doors he'd not previously investigated. Picking the one to his right, he cautiously opened it. Inside was a collection of boys' clothing, most of it in Hufflepuff black-and-yellow. As he gently slid the hangers aside, he noticed something that did stick out. At the bottom of the closet's rear wall was a small door no more than six inches high.

Harry pondered the door's possible significance for several precious seconds. "*What's the point of a door that's too small to fit through?*" he thought to himself. But then, he smiled. "*Who says it's too small to fit through when you can be as big or as small as you want!*"

The Slytherin closed his eyes in concentration. When he opened them again, he had a momentary bout of vertigo from the enormous size of the room. For his psychic body had been shrunk down to six inches, and so the ceiling now seemed a mile high.

"*Get a move on, Harry! Or else you'll get eaten by the cat!*"

Harry darted into the closet towards the door which opened with a whispered Alohomora. On the other side was a long corridor lit by flickering torches that illuminated stone walls and a floor covered by an inch or so of dust. Carefully, Harry stepped into the corridor. And then took another step. And a third.

On the fourth step, he *screamed*.

Then, suddenly, he was back in his own body, gasping desperately while clutching his aching head.

"Ah, such a pity," Snape drawled sarcastically. "And you were doing so well."

"What the hell was that?!" Harry spat angrily. "None of your prior mind-traps have actually been painful!"

"Of course not, Potter," Snape responded while handing over a pain-relieving potion. "The Hubert Turnipseed memory palace is for rank beginners. The doorway you passed through leads to the Mr. X memory palace. Congratulations, Potter. You have graduated from hopeless amateur to the level of stumbling mediocrity."

Harry grimaced at the backhanded compliment before chugging the potion. "So, what hit me at the end?"

"Before I answer, tell me what mistake you made and what you should have done differently?"

The boy thought for a moment. "There was some sort of mind-trap built into the floor that I triggered by stepping on it. Or, more accurately I suppose, imagining that I was stepping on it. I should have used Ventus to blow away the dust so I could see where I was walking."

"Indeed. Had you done so, you might have noticed that the passage floor consisted of interlocking stone tiles, several of which were marked with the runic representation of the Cruciatus Curse."

Harry did a double take. "*You Crucio'd me?!"*

Snape shrugged. "Surely you must have anticipated that progressing from the Turnipseed level to the Mr. X level would present a commensurate increase in the dangers presented. In any event, while that trap involved exposing you to one of my memories of being subjected to the Cruciatus by the Dark Lord, the intensity level had been reduced to only one-tenth of what the actual experience felt like."

The boy's eyebrows rose in surprise. "So ... an actual Crucio would be ten times worse than that?!"

"Indeed. Hence the fact that you are not still writhing on the ground in the grip of an agonizing palsy."

"... thanks for small favors, I guess. Am I trying that again tonight?"

"No," said Snape. "One mini-Crucio per session is enough, I think. Let us return to the theoretical part of your training. Here is the essay you turned in last week about the various forms of Legilimency resistance that exist other than Occlumency. I have marked your errors and made note of additional research materials. I expect an updated essay by next week. Any questions?"

"I'm still unclear on how being an Animagus grants resistance to Legilimency."

"It has to do with the dual-souled nature of the Animagus. When attempting to penetrate such a mind, the Legilimens is confronted by two thought streams, one of which is that of an animal. Imagine that Hubert Turnipseed were a cat Animagus. In such a case, the cat you saw in his room would not simply be a mind-trap but rather a fully independent part of his psyche able to take direct and intelligent actions against you.."

"Is it the same for werewolves?"

"Yes. An untransformed werewolf reacts to Legilimency as if it were a wolf Animagus."

Harry nodded. "What about a transformed werewolf?"

Snape scoffed. "Sadly, research in that area is sparse, as anyone *stupid* enough to try Legilimizing a transformed werewolf would take whatever insights he acquired to his grave."

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**11 March 1994**

***From the Daily Prophet Classified Ad Section***

***REWARD!***

*The Daily Prophet offers a cash reward for any information pertaining to a suspected Death Eater named Marcellus Frump, last seen in DMLE custody in 1981.*

*Current whereabouts unknown.*

*Please direct all inquiries to M. Scarabee, c/o Daily Prophet, London.*

*No time-wasters.*

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**15 March 1994**

***A meeting room within the Department of Mysteries***

Three people in dark robes sat around the circular table as they reviewed the report. The first was known only as Number 1, the Director of the Department of Mysteries and the only Unspeakable whose identity was unknown even to his (or her?) comrades in the Department. The second was known in the Department as Number 7. However, Number 7 served as the Voice of the Unspeakables, the only

Unspeakable whose name (Saul Croaker) was widely known outside the Department. The final member present was Number 17, whose real name was known within the Department but not relevant to the current situation.

"Well," said Number 1, "you called this meeting, 17. Can I take it there's been some movement on the Cryptohedron?"

"Y-yes sir," 17 stammered. "Early this morning, the Cryptohedron initiated its sixth-stage unfurling. Based on the pattern of movement and the astrological associations of its current form, we have pinpointed the date and time of the final-stage unfurling. The Cryptohedron will be primed for activation at approximately 9:00 a.m. on March 28th."

"Do we think that ... I mean ... do we know what the cause is?" Number 7 asked nervously.

"No," 17 replied. "By its very nature, it is impossible for us to know why the Cryptohedron has activated itself until the triggering event has already come and gone. Only one person can safely use the Cryptohedron to avert imminent catastrophe."

Number 1 sighed impatiently. "And do we know who our wizarding savior is?"

Number 17 grimaced and then produced a file which he handed over to the Head Unspeakable. The older man (or woman) opened the file and immediately gaped in shock. Number 1 took a few minutes to read and reread the information before looking up at Number 17 incredulously.

"Do you mean to tell me, Number 17, that the fate of Wizarding Britain rests on the shoulder of a Hogwarts Third Year?!"



"Yes sir, all our astrological calculations and divinatory exercises confirm it. As incredible as it seems, *that* is the person who has been chosen by the Cryptohedron for ... well, for whatever reason it has chosen."

Number 1 fumed and turned to Croaker. "You realize we'll have to involve Dumbledore in this!"

Croaker nodded. "Fortuitously, Albus has already contacted me to ask for a favor. I'm sure I can parlay it into a mutually beneficial arrangement."

Number 1 grunted but said nothing. At times like these, it was good to be an Unspeakable – it was the only thing that kept him (or her) from screaming.

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***16 March 1994***  
***Somewhere in Albania***  
***Just after midnight***

Mr. January hissed in pain as Narcissa pulled the chain connecting his left arm to the bedpost taut.

"You don't have to make it so tight, Cissy," he growled. "I'm not going anywhere."

She smiled cruelly. "You are a powerful wizard, poppet. We don't want you getting loose through some wandless trickery, now do we?"

"Pfft. You just enjoy seeing your lovers in pain."

She chuckled but did not deny the accusation. And truth be told, the occasional love-making the couple had engaged in during their Albanian sojourn quite frequently incorporated pain along with pleasure for both wizard and witch. But this

was not foreplay. Their Lord had a mission for Mr. January, one for which the couple's present bondage activities were a prerequisite.

Once Narcissa had all four of her captive's limbs tightly chained to the bed, she wrapped a thick black mask over his eyes to obscure all vision.

"Are you going to gag me too?" the man asked mildly.

"No, poppet," she replied. "I'd have to take it off to feed you eventually. And besides, you scream delightfully when sufficiently motivated."

He snorted. "Fine. Enjoy your games. I'll see you in two weeks. Try not to leave any permanent scars."

"I shall do my best, but I make no guarantees."

He rolled his eyes beneath the heavy blindfold. Then, he closed his eyes and focused on finding the doorway hidden in the depths of his mind. Narcissa watched as his breathing slowed and he appeared to be drifting off to sleep. Then, she turned and left the sumptuous bedroom, locking the door behind her. Before she could take another step away, she heard a scream from inside.

"HEEEELLLP! SOMEBODY! PLEASE - HELP ME! FATHER! ARE YOU THERE?! PLEASE BELIEVE ME! I'M INNOCENT! HEEELLLLLLPPPP!"

Narcissa closed her eyes and inhaled slowly and luxuriously, as if the man's hysterical screams were the sweetest perfume. Then, she walked away as Barty Crouch Jr. continued to beg for mercy that would never come.

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***From the desk of Saul Croaker, Voice of the Unspeakables.***

*Albus -*

*I know you're leaving in a few days for the ICW meeting in Paris about that sporting event or whatever it is, but I need to meet with you before you depart. You've been pestering me for weeks about getting a sample of Potion #23, but you've been cagey about whose memories you want to restore. I can get you a few samples, old friend, but I need a favor in return. It's about one of your students.*

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***19 March 1994***

***Excerpt from a memory extract ...***

Two figures, a man and a woman, sat on one side of a table. On the other side sat two males staring across the table with vapid yet curious expressions. The man looked like Burt Kwouk. The woman looked like Elke Sommer. The other two men looked like - and were - Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrange.

The first two took turns delivering a prepared and memorized speech for the benefit of the Lestrange brothers ... and the benefit of those who would soon see the memory of this presentation. The pair alternated; Burt Kwouk would speak first, Elke Sommer second.

"Our names are not important. All you need to know is that we are here to correct an injustice."

"We are the children of a man you may know as Marcellus Frump. That was not his true name, for he was a Metamorphmagus who concealed his status as such from the British government to avoid Conscription. He was from

a Pureblood family, but not a Noble one, though he thought by serving You-Know-Who loyally, he could win such status for his family."

"To that end, he took the Dark Mark and became a secret Death Eater, using his powers to spy for You-Know-Who and to cause dissension and confusion. He served in a Death Eater cell along with Bellatrix, Rodolphus, and Rabastan Lestranger. Narcissa Malfoy was also a willing participant though she did not go on raids. While he committed many crimes as a Death Eater, including framing Sirius Black for his crimes so that he could flee the country, our father repented of his sins later as he was dying of an untreatable magical illness. His last request was that we somehow find a way to exonerate Sirius Black."

"To that end, we have engaged in a plan several years in the making. We discovered that Gilderoy Lockhart, who was set to become the new Hogwarts DADA instructor, was a criminal who had used Memory Charms to steal the achievements of genuine heroes in order to improve his own reputation. We blackmailed him into helping us, but when we learned he was responsible for the petrification attacks, we forced him to confess to his crimes and Obliviate himself with the Tabula Rasa curse. We learned the Tabula Rasa from an Australian wizard who supported our goals and who somehow mastered the curse without swearing any oaths not to share it."

"Afterwards, we made use of research performed by students – at Lockhart's direction but really for our benefit – to develop a plan to free Sirius Black from Azkaban and prove his innocence."

The two shook their heads violently, and their faces changed from those of Kwouk and Sommer to James Potter

and Cornelius Fudge. Rather amusingly, Minister Fudge was still wearing the dress that Elke Sommer had worn.

"In these forms, we freed the Lestranges and Augustus Rookwood and then took them out of the country for interrogation. We extracted memories from the three Lestranges that will confirm Black's innocence. As you will see in one of the memory extracts, the Death Eaters had access to a potion Augustus Rookwood stole from the Unspeakables that conceals the effects of Memory Charms. This was used to make James and Lily Potter falsely believe that Sirius Black was their Secret Keeper when it was actually *Peter Pettigrew*. We confirmed this from the memories of the Lestranges. We were unable to break the will of Rookwood, so we kept him in a comatose state for the duration of our work."

"It is our hope that he is irreparably insane as a result of his captivity."

"We were aided in our effort by a third sibling who was also a Metamorphmagus and who impersonated Auror Michael Proudfoot at Azkaban. Sadly, there was a breach in our security. Bellatrix Lestrange briefly escaped and killed our brother before being slain herself. We have Bellatrix's body in stasis. You will find her corpse along with the two Lestrange Brothers and Rookwood and these memory vials."

"Sirius Black is in a safe location recovering from his ordeal. He will be released when the Ministry acknowledges the truth: that he never had a trial and was falsely imprisoned. The trial transcript that sent him to Azkaban was actually from the secret trial of our father, who was captured before the destruction of You-Know-Who and interrogated under Veritaserum. He was freed by unknown DMLE employees

either bribed or Imperius'd to do so, and then Narcissa Black-Malfoy, under the name Ariana McFlossy, seduced Herbert Cattermole and persuaded him to falsify the trial records so as to convict Sirius Black instead. We do not know her reasons for framing Black, but we assume she wanted him dead in disgrace so that her newborn son Draco might someday inherit the Black estate. Narcissa later murdered Cattermole while they were on their '*honeymoon*' on the island of St. Cyprian. A copy of the McFlossy-Cattermole wedding certificate carrying Narcissa Black's magical signature will be included with the memory extracts. What we have told you about the McFlossy-Narcissa Black connection can be confirmed by speaking with the Chief Auror on St Cyprian."

"Naturally, if the British Ministry refuses to give Black a new trial and a chance to clear his name, we will instead help him to escape to another nation that has no extradition treaty with wizarding Britain, but we hope that once you see the evidence collected, you will do the proper thing."

"*ANNND CUT!*" Rufus allowed the Charms that had concealed his presence to lapse, and he strode forward to collect memories from the befuddled Rodolphus and Rabastan before they had a chance to forget what they'd observed.

"Well done, both of you. You in particular, Miss Tonks. Should the Auror Corps not work out, you could have quite a career on the wizarding stage."

By that point, the two Metamorphmagi had resumed their true forms – Regulus Black and Nymphadora Tonks.

"Thanks ... I guess," said the young woman cautiously. "To be honest, I'm still not entirely comfortable with all this."

"The Greater Good, my dear," Rufus said cheerfully. "Just remind yourself that it's all for the Greater Good. You can excuse *anything* if you do that long enough and loud enough."

"Setting aside these ethical debates," Regulus interrupted, "when will we be able to finish all this? The Tonkses have helped Sirius greatly, but I want him exonerated so we can get him to St. Mungo's for proper treatment."

"Soon, soon," Rufus said. "I just want to make sure the editing is exactly right. Second week in April, I should think. I want to wait until Albus gets back from the ICW conference so he can add his imprimatur to the proceedings. And hopefully keep James Potter from making a hash of everything."

Reg nodded. "And what's the status with our Bellatrix LeStrange substitute?"

Scrimgeour's face became pensive. "Lucius is handling it," he said rather quietly, as if it was not a topic he wished to consider.

It may have been for the Greater Good, but that didn't stop the next part of the plan from feeling ... sordid.

---

***Later that evening in Longbottom Manor ...***

"Do we know his name?" Bellatrix said guardedly.

"I doubt even he knows it anymore," Lucius answered.

They were referring to the elderly and nearly-comatose man lying in the bed in front of them. Lucius had "acquired" the dying Muggle a week earlier from a less-than-reputable

American nursing home for indigent dementia patients whose administrator was amenable to bribery. He was a John Doe, with no known friends or relatives.

"That still doesn't make it right," Ted Tonks said angrily even as he took the old man's pulse. "I took an oath to save lives, not hasten them!"

"Healer Tonks, we are doing nothing to hasten this man's demise," Lucius said in a tired voice. "Be honest with yourself. Is there anything at this point that either Muggle or magical healing can do to heal this man? Or to extend his life? Or give him anything more than the comfort we have already provided?"

"... no."

"Then console yourself that several lives might be saved through this Muggle's sacrifice, albeit an involuntary one."

Ted didn't respond. After a few moments, several of the crystals that had been suspended over the dying man's bed began to jangle.

"It's time," Ted said in a leaden voice. He reached for a vial on the nearby table, but Andromeda stepped forward and took it from his hand.

"I'll do it," she said.

"Andi ..."

"Hush, husband. It's *my* sister we're doing this for." She stepped around her husband. "Besides, you're a Hufflepuff, and I don't want misplaced guilt to haunt you until the end of your days. This ... this is Slytherin work."



With that, she removed the stopper and poured the Polyjuice Potion down the old man's throat. His whole body shuddered and rippled, and in the space of a few seconds, his aged body had been replaced with that of Bellatrix Black.

Even in the new and younger body, the old man's breathing grew more and more labored until finally he gasped loudly and then went still. The jangling crystal ceased all its noise. The anonymous old man was dead. And since he had died while under the effects of Polyjuice Potion, that potion's effects would never wear off.

Across the room, the *real* Bellatrix Black stared at a cooling body wearing her face and struggled to keep the emotions churning inside her from spilling forth.

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***24 March 1994***  
***A Hogwarts corridor***  
***Midnight***

As Malachi Sturgeon carried out his rounds, his ears twitched slightly at the sound of a faint high-pitched giggling. The next full moon was only a few days away, and the werewolf's senses always became more acute this time of the month. Suddenly, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up ... and he swiftly took two large steps to the left. The water balloon hit the floor where he'd just been standing and popped with a splat. Sturgeon shook his head and vanished the remains of the balloon and the water that had splashed all over the floor with a flick of his wand.

"Better luck next time, Peeves," he called out smugly.

"Awww!" cried the poltergeist. "Loopy Loony Lupin always spoils Peevesies fun!"

"So sorry," said the wizard while scanning the area for the elusive spirit. Then, his brow furrowed. "Hang on! How do you know that name?"

With that, Peeves, who had been invisible, shimmered into view. "What name does Peeves know? Loopy? Loony? Or Lupin? They all fits! HAHAAHAHA!"

"Some better than others. Why do you call me Lupin?"

"Loony Lupin and Headmaster Bumblebee thinks they's so clever with the tricky Fidelius!" Peeves said merrily. "But silly wizardses don't know Peeves! Peeves sees all! Hears all! KNOWS all! Including Loony Lupin's precious Secret!"

The werewolf nodded. "Ah, I see. You were observing invisibly at some point when the Secret was discussed and overheard it. Or perhaps was watching invisibly over someone's shoulder while they read the note! But no, I'd have heard you!"

The poltergeist threw its head back and laughed. "AHAAHAHAHA! Silly Lupin! Peeves can be quiet ... when it's *important*!"

"A frightening revelation," Remus quipped. "But not a great concern as you cannot *share* that Secret with anyone else."

Peeves didn't respond except to blow the caretaker a loud raspberry. Remus moved to continue his late-night rounds but then paused and looked back at the poltergeist speculatively. After months of searching the castle in his free time, the ex-Marauder was struck with inspiration.

"Say Peeves? Do you really know all, see all, etc. etc.?" he asked casually.

"Peeves does! Peeves does!"

"Well, if that's true, do you happen to know whatever became of that old Map the Marauders used to use back during my student days?"

"Hmmpf! Of course, Peeves knows! But Peeves is no tattletale!"

Lupin smiled. "Not even if I arranged for a few Zonko's gift boxes to be left where my old friend Peeves can find them? Say, with a few dungbombs included?"

The poltergeist's luminous face glowed even brighter, and it clapped its hands merrily. "Ah, Peeves has *missed* the Marauders so much! That's why Peeves decided to steal the Marauders' Map out of Bumblebee's office when he wasn't looking and leave it for the Sons of the Marauders to find during a detention!"

"The ... Sons of the Marauders?" Remus questioned. Months earlier, he'd mentioned the Map to Jim Potter, but the boy hadn't known anything about it. "Do you mean Jim, Harry, or both?"

"*Neither!* The Sneaky Snake and the Loudmouthed Lion are the sons of James Potter, but not the *true* heirs of the Marauders!"

Remus thought for a moment and his own face lit up in amused insight. "The Weasley Twins have the Map! That explains their illustrious pranking reputations!"

"Ah, but the Weasley Terrors only *had* the Map. It's been *passed on!*"

"To who?"

Peeves grinned maliciously. "How many dungbombs will Peevsie be getting?"

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### ***The next morning ...***

Harry Potter's eyes shot open and he sat up in bed. He'd had a strange unsettling dream that he could not recall any of upon awakening. Not exactly a nightmare, just ... weird. A dream he couldn't recall at all yet somehow knew he'd had before. Déjà vu of the unconscious, as it were. His watch said that it was quarter to 6, so he wasn't up much earlier than usual. The Slytherin gathered his toiletries and with a loud yawn left his private room for a shower. To his surprise, he almost bumped into Blaise in the hallway.

"What's got you up so early?" said Zabini.

Harry shrugged. "I woke up and couldn't get back to sleep. Might as well get an early start to the day."

"Excited for the Easter Break?" the other boy asked.

"You could say that," Harry said somewhat evasively. From his mirror-conversation with Regulus the night before, the "*Azkabal*" would be delivering the Lestranges and Augustus Rookwood to the Ministry sometime during the Easter Break, along with evidence to exonerate Sirius ... and a fake dead Bellatrix. Reg didn't offer any explanation of where they'd secured such a convenient corpse, and Harry asked no questions.

An hour later, he and Blaise were just about to enter the Great Hall for breakfast when he heard someone calling his name.

"Mr. Potter!" It was Malachi Sturgeon aka Remus Lupin aka Moony the Second. The Caretaker swiftly strode up to him.

"Yes, Mr. ... Sturgeon?"

"Come with me, young man," Sturgeon said with what Harry had come to recognize as fake gruffness. He still didn't understand why the otherwise amiable young wizard insisted on acting surly and mean when performing his official caretaker functions. "*Tradition*," apparently.

Nonplussed, Harry shrugged to Blaise and then left the boy to follow Sturgeon to his office. Once inside, Remus Lupin dropped the grumpy caretaker act and could hardly contain his enthusiasm.

"Harry, I know this may seem like a strange request, but I must ask you to turn out your pockets and allow me to look through your bag."

Harry looked at the man suspiciously. "Um ... why?"

Remus sighed. "Because I believe you have something in your possession that you should not. Now let me rephrase that as an order from a Hogwarts staff member. Hand over your bag and turn out your pockets."

Harry glowered at the man but sullenly complied. As he emptied his pockets of their meager contents, he had no idea what this encounter was about. But he quickly guessed when Remus gave a cry as he pulled a particular old parchment out of the bottom of his book bag.

"Eureka!" Remus exclaimed.

"What?" Harry asked cautiously.

"It's Greek for this bath is too hot!" the man said with a laugh. Harry rolled his eyes. The joke hadn't been that funny when Sirius had made it months earlier and was less so now. Then again, with all the Sirius/Serious puns, it wasn't surprising that the Marauders were prone to reusing each other's material. Remus noticed Harry's expression and – unlike Sirius – at least had the decency to look abashed over the inappropriate humor.

"Sorry, got a little excited. Do you fully understand what this is, Harry?"

"Um, yeah. It's the Marauders' Map. You, my father, and two of your friends made it when you were students."

"Indeed. And I searched diligently for it once I arrived, but when no trace of it was found, I assumed it had been destroyed or lost forever. I only learned that you had it last night. Peeves told me."

"Did he now?" said Harry, who was suddenly very interested in how to go about exorcising poltergeists.

"Yes. And I must say, I do wish you'd turned this into a teacher rather than use it for ... well, whatever you've been using it for. Pranks, perhaps?"

"I'm not really a prankster," Harry replied in a cool tone. "But I am a Slytherin, and we make use of our advantages."

Remus coughed delicately but chose not to delve further into what a Slytherin might have used the Map for that a Gryffindor would not have considered. "Yes, well, I'm afraid I must deprive you of your advantage."

"Remus!" Harry exclaimed, but the man held up a placating hand.

"It's alright, Harry. I'll get it back to you when I'm done."  
Then, he winced. "Well, unless the Headmaster confiscates it again. He rather thought it a breach of privacy when he first became aware of it. Still, if I can, I'll get this back to you. Unless I accidentally destroy it, in which case I'll make you a new one, a *better* one! But right now, I *must* have the Marauder's Map!"

"... why?" the boy asked suspiciously.

"Because ... I believe with this Map we can end it!"

Harry blinked. "End what?"

"End the Death Eater Menace!" Remus exclaimed triumphantly as he grasped the boy firmly by the shoulders in what was meant to be a reassuring gesture but failed utterly at that purpose. "End it and put Sirius Black and those other bastards back in Azkaban where they belong!"

Harry plastered on his best fake smile to conceal the horror he felt.

"That's ... great, Remus. Absolutely ... great."

# **The Hunting of Sirius Black**

## Chapter Notes

### SHAMELESS PLUG!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

***Harry Potter  
and the Death Eater Menace***

***Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.***

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## ***Chapter 38: The Hunting of Sirius Black***

***25 March 1994  
The Potions Classroom  
7:50 a.m.***

"Get a hold of yourself, Potter!" exclaimed Professor Snape.  
"You're a Slytherin and an Occlumens! Act like it!"



Harry closed his eyes and tried to center himself. Both Snape and Rufus Scrimgeour, who had also been summoned to this quick meeting, looked at him with concern.

"Yes, Potter," Scrimgeour added. "What has you so uncharacteristically frenzied?"

Harry started to speak but then froze. It was mere moments after Malachi Sturgeon (who was secretly Remus Lupin) had confiscated the Marauders' Map with the gleeful announcement that it could somehow be used to track down Sirius Black. Unfortunately, Sturgeon's true identity was protected by the Fidelius Charm. While Harry knew the Secret (or at least the part pertaining to who Sturgeon really was), the Charm prevented him from revealing that information to anyone else. He struggled to work around it.

"First of all, there's a Fidelius in play, so I can't say everything I need to. But what I can say is this: There is an enchanted Map that used to belong to the Marauders - that is, my father and his three closest friends - when they were at school. It shows the location of everyone in the castle and on the grounds. But apparently, it can do more than that. It can be modified to track down any of the Marauders wherever they are. And one of the former Marauders is *Sirius Black!*"

The two older men glanced at one another. "And where is this map now, Potter?" Snape asked grimly.

Harry grimaced. He knew from his experiments with the Fidelius that he could say that Malachi Sturgeon had the Map *or* that Remus Lupin had it, but he could *not* reveal that they were one and the same. But whose name would be the best to use?

"Mr. Sturgeon the caretaker has it," the boy finally said. "Apparently, Peeves told him I had it, and he confiscated it not ten minutes ago. He said he was going to take it to someone who could help him make the modifications needed. I assume he means the Headmaster."

"No," Scrimgeour said with a shake of his head. "Albus left early this morning for the Ministry. He's accompanying Crouch, Bagman, Malfoy, and some other dignitaries to Paris for a big ICW meeting."

"I will try to waylay Mr. Sturgeon and make some excuse to get the Map from him," he continued. "Snape, send word to our allies to let them know of this complication."

"You should both know that Mr. Sturgeon ... is more than he appears to be. I wish I could say more than that."

Rufus nodded at that information and then left as fast as his disability would allow him. Alas, by the time he made his way to the Caretaker's Office, the man was already gone, and there was a note stuck to his door indicating he'd likely be gone for the day.

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### ***Meanwhile at 12 Grimmauld Place ...***

Regulus Black was still blissfully asleep in his bed when a sudden bright light roused him. He opened his eyes blearily and then let out a surprised squawk. Somehow, there was a delicate translucent silvery doe in his bedchambers. His surprise only increased when the doe spoke with the incongruously masculine voice of Severus Snape.

"Regulus, this is Snape. We have a security risk. Apparently, a man named Malachi Sturgeon has acquired what Harry identifies as the Marauders' Map. It's something your

brother and his miscreant former friends devised when they were students, and Harry believes it can be used to track Sirius down even though the house you're in is Unplottable. I do not know if the boy's fears are well-grounded, but you know as well as I do that he is not given to exaggeration. Discuss it with Sirius and let us know what he says."

Regulus grimaced as the doe faded away. Then, he looked around the room as if to make certain this wasn't a particularly unusual dream. Satisfied that it was not, he threw on a robe and went to wake his brother.

"Huh," Sirius said with much less alarm than Snape's Patronus had shown. "The Marauders' Map, eh? I thought surely Filch would have burned that thing years ago. How the hell did Harry end up with it?"

"I've no idea and don't care," Regulus answered. "The important thing is - are Harry's concerns valid? Can this Map be used to track you down even hidden here in an Unplottable house?"

Sirius thought about the matter. "I don't see how. We keyed it into the Hogwarts wards. It shouldn't show me or anyone else beyond the grounds."

Reg sat down in a chair next to his brother's bed. "How did it work?"

Sirius snorted. "To be honest, we were never 100% sure. I found the earliest version in my pocket after ... well, after a Marauders' excursion. At that point, it was only a blank scrap of parchment that would show our four names and where we were in relation to one another."

"You ... found it?" the younger Black said incredulously. "You just happened to find something enchanted to spy on you and decided to goof around with it?"

"We were careful," Sirius said defensively. "We finally figured that it was based on a modified Homonculous Charm."

Reg blinked. "*You* figured that out?"

Sirius made a face. "Alright, alright. Remus figured it out. James and I always skated through on pure talent until we buckled down for our OWLS and NEWTS. Remus was the one who did all the research."

"Right, so did he explain how the Homonculous Charm worked? I'm not familiar with it."

"I wasn't either. It's a pretty obscure Charm. You use it to make imprints of people's souls on inanimate objects."

At that, Regulus sputtered angrily. "We are on a quest for the Dark Lord's horcruxes, and you and your friends were experimenting with soul magics as students?!"

Sirius shook his head. "Relax! It's nothing like a horcrux. We weren't chopping up our souls. Just ... mirroring them. It's basically the same spell used for magical portraits except the way we used it there was no visual element, just written words from copies of the four of us. Anyway, once we learned the Homonculous Charm, we figured out the other Charms and Transfiguration spells needed to tie it into our collective memories of Hogwarts as expressed through our Map-selves. Then, we tied the Map into the castle's warding matrix. Poor Wormtail had to spend months crawling through walls and pipes with a tracking spell on him to sync everything up."

He laughed, but then, his face darkened as he remembered the fourth member of their group, the one who'd betrayed them all.

"Impressive," Regulus said. "Also *disappointing* that you'd put so much ingenuity into something I'm sure you only used for childish pranks. But answer me this: Is there anyway a Homonuculous Charm tied to your soul could be used to track you away from Hogwarts?"

Sirius grew pensive. "Maybe, in theory. But to do so, you'd have to unlock the Map's security spells. That was my main contribution. Well, that and the insults the Map would use if someone we didn't like tried to use it. Modifying the Map in any way requires biomagical signatures from all four Marauders. This mysterious caretaker might be able to get blood from James and *Wormtail*, but I doubt he could get any from Remus if he's still in Nepal or wherever, and I *know* he can't get anything from me!"

---

***The Law Office of Peter Pettigrew, Esq.***  
***9:10 a.m.***

"Slow down, Remus. You're babbling." Peter had been surprised to find his oldest friend waiting at the door to his law office when he arrived. He swiftly bundled Remus into a conference room past his young French secretary (who sniffed disdainfully at the shabbily dressed wizard).  
"Explain it from the start."

To Peter's surprise, Remus reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the Marauders' Map which he held up almost triumphantly.

"Where did you find that?!" Peter spluttered. "I thought you said it wasn't in Filch's office."

"It wasn't, Peter. *Harry* had it this whole time!"

Pettigrew's face darkened slightly at that, as if he was offended by Harry Potter's possession of a Marauders heirloom. But then, he focused past that to what was important now.

"Okay, so you've got the Map. What of it, Remus, other than sentimentality?"

Remus shook his head. "It's more than sentimentality, Peter. *We can use this to find Black!*"

"How?! We could never use it to see anything beyond the Hogwarts grounds before!"

"True, but the magic at the base of the Map's architecture is a Homonculous Charm cast on each of the four Marauders. Each of the Marauder-copies inside this Map reflects the soul of the original, just like a magical portrait reflects the soul of the person depicted within and remains so even after that person's death. That spiritual connection cannot be fooled by Animagery, Metamorphmagery, Polyjuice or invisibility."

Remus leaned forward in excitement. "But most importantly, *the Homonculous Charm cannot be defeated by distance!* Just as a magical portrait can step between two connected frames that are on opposite sides of the globe, this Map, if primed to do so, can point towards any of the Marauders *wherever* we might be. Even an Unplottable location cannot conceal us; only a Fidelius or comparable magic can."

Peter's eyes widened in surprise. "That's ... a powerful spell. I never realized it could do all that. Why don't more people know about it given how many of the nation's most

prominent individuals have magical portraits of themselves?"

Remus laughed. "Peter, it *is* known among people who *make* such portraits. That's why most magical portraits are enchanted so that the figures inside do not awaken until *after* the person depicted is dead. The portrait has no direct connection to one being depicted until it is awoken except for when that person touches it to update its memories, and it has no connection afterwards because the one being depicted is no longer alive. It was just ... highly unusual for a quartet of precocious schoolboys to muck about the Homonculous Charm without a care in the world and activate our own spiritual reflections prematurely in a format we all cheerfully used to facilitate childish pranks."

Peter chuckled. "Alright then. So how do we use this?"

Remus suddenly looked pensive. "Well, as much as it pains me to admit it, I suppose the first step is to call James. Resetting the Map in the manner we need will require biomagical signatures from all four of us. So, in addition to requiring a drop of blood or a strand of hair from James himself, we'll also need his assistance to get a sample from Sirius."

Pettigrew frowned. "What makes you think James can get a biomagical sample from Black?"

Remus looked smug. "You forget - research skill was always my contribution to the Marauders. And when I learned Sirius had escaped Azkaban, I made a study of Auror procedures among other things. Sirius was convicted via a secret Death Eater trial. And they do have *some* safeguards in place to prevent things like convicts being replaced before they get to Azkaban whether by Polyjuice or other

means. Assuming they followed those procedures, just before an Auror fed Black his three drops of Veritaserum, both a hair sample and a blood sample would have been taken for the court file. As Chief Auror, James can get us those samples with no problem."

"... yes ... quite convenient," muttered Peter, who knew perfectly well that Black never had a trial and so no court-ordered sample would have been taken. He studied Remus for a moment.

"Are you not still ... reluctant to confront James?" he asked cautiously.

Remus rose from his seat and moved to the window suddenly on edge. "Honestly ... yes. I'm worried about how he'll react to my having been at Hogwarts this whole year. About how he'll react to Lily having known and keeping it from him. And you doing the same! How he'll react to Jim learning both Wu Xi Do and Animagery behind his back."

As the werewolf spoke with his back to Peter, the rat Animagus quietly picked up a letter opener from his desk. He gritted his teeth and grimaced silently as he pricked the tip of his forefinger hard enough to draw blood. Then, he slowly began to rub the bloody finger against his thumb in a circular motion, spreading the blood over them as he stared intently at Remus's back. The other man did not notice any of his actions, but nevertheless, Remus began to breathe more deeply, and his eyes fluttered slightly.

"And I suppose," Remus said with a slight thickness to his voice, "I'm worried how *I'll* react when I see him again. Whether the old arguments will start up again."

"Well then," Peter said in a soothing voice. "Let's do it this way. You can tell me what to do to prime the Map and then



contribute your own blood sample. Then, just leave the Map with me. I'll take care of getting a sample from James and ... Sirius's sample from the file. You shouldn't feel forced to confront James if you're not ready to do so. Just ... *let me handle it.*"

Pettigrew's words seemed to echo in Remus's head, and the werewolf turned back towards him. "Peter," he said slowly. "I can't ask you to ...."

*"Let me handle it."*

Remus blinked a few times. Then, he smiled. "Alright. If you insist. Thank you, Peter. It's good to know you'll always have my back."

Peter smiled. "Of course! That's what friends are for!" Then, he cocked his head as a new thought sprang to mind.

"Still it might be necessary to let James know of your identity when I meet with him. By any chance, do you have that note with the Secret written out on it?"

Remus returned his best friend's smile as he reached into his jacket pocket.

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***Peter Pettigrew's apartment in Diagon Alley  
Just past noon***

Fenrir Greyback frowned as he examined the scrap of paper before handing it off to Stavros. The younger werewolf was quiet and somewhat nervous. It had been several months since he'd last been in Peter's presence, but the impact of the Animagus's "*lesson on pack hierarchy*" after the Hogsmeade debacle was still felt. On the bright side, at least Stavros's fingers had finally grown back. His

caution did not prevent him from reading the note aloud, however.

*"Malachi Sturgeon is actually the werewolf Remus Lupin."*

He turned to his alpha. "So ... what does this mean?"

But it was a voice from another room that answered (and, oddly, from a room that would not have existed except for magic).

"That paper contains a Fidelius Secret, my young friend," said Peter absentmindedly as he reentered the living room carrying a small locked chest. The secret door closed behind him and transformed back into a solid patch of wall between two windows that was blank save for a picture of the teenaged Marauders.

"The fact that my best friend and Fenrir's *favorite cub* has been working at Hogwarts as a Caretaker under a false name is magically occluded. Only someone who read that note or else heard the truth directly from the Secret Keeper Albus Dumbledore could even conceive of Malachi Sturgeon's true identity."

He looked over to Fenrir with an amused expression. "I'm sure you'll agree, Greyback - suddenly it makes *a lot more sense* that the Hogwarts Caretaker could defeat poor Janos. An older werewolf, fully trained as a wizard, *and* the beneficiary of over a decade of training in Eastern mysticism and magical hand-to-hand combat? Now that we know the Secret, the outcome of that fight is suddenly and retroactively one-sided."

Stavros felt a stab of anger at Peter's reference to his late brother, but he bit down on it. Fenrir was his alpha, but he knew all too well who was *truly* dominant and had no wish

to provoke Peter again. Meanwhile, Peter placed the chest on the coffee table, slashed his hand with his wand, and dripped blood onto the chest.

"I solemnly swear I'm up to no good," the Death Eater said. In response, the chest popped open. But to the surprise of the two werewolves, the pass-phrase had a secondary effect, for a different and larger parchment that had been spread out on the coffee table that had been blank was suddenly covered with an intricate map of Hogwarts, complete with tiny named dots representing the feet of the people within. Peter leaned over to study the Marauders' Map.

"Hmm. Looks like everyone is at lunch. There's Jim ... *and Harry*." Peter's nose wrinkled in disdain as he said the older twin's name. Then, he looked thoughtful for a moment. "In retrospect, I should have waited to reveal the Secret to you. I find myself mildly curious as to what name you would have seen floating next to our old friend – Remus Lupin or Malachi Sturgeon. Oh well, it's not that important, I suppose."

"So what do you want us to do with this, Peter?" Fenrir said gruffly.

"As it is? Nothing. It's not ready yet."

As Peter spoke, he fished a small vial out of his jacket pocket containing several drops of Remus Lupin's blood. After removing the cork, he added a few drops of his own blood, followed by two black hairs taken from small vials in the chest. One was labeled *Sirius Black* and the other *James Potter*. He swirled the vial in his hand before upending it over the Marauders' Map. Then, he touched his wand to the blood and hair spatter and muttered a few words. Instantly,

the display of Hogwarts melted away. After a few seconds, there were only four dots remaining, each of which represented one of the Marauders. Peter frowned at the parchment. Then, he tapped it with his wand again and spoke a few more code words that had been incorporated into the Map when he was still a schoolboy.

"*Son of a bitch!*" Peter spat in a mixture of anger and astonishment.

"What is it?" Fenrir asked. Peter looked up at him with a cruel smile.

"All this time ... Sirius Black has been hiding *less than five miles from here!*"

"What?!"

Peter tapped the dot that bore Black's name. "Here he is. Somewhere in Central London, I reckon...." He paused and then barked out a laugh. "Oh, now *that's* irony for you! After all these years, Sirius finally went *home*! He and his brother were raised in a secret wizarding house hidden somewhere in Islington. I don't know where exactly, but we can use the Map tonight to find it ... and *him!*"

"Tonight?" Stavros asked. "Why not go now?"

Peter glared at the werewolf who instantly looked down submissively. "We'll wait until tonight because I'll wager the house is Unplottable and probably has other protections as well. And if it becomes necessary to *burn down a whole city block just to be sure*, I'd rather not do it by the light of day!"

The two werewolves nodded in understanding. The *third* werewolf in Peter's apartment was lying on

Peter's bed under the effects of Draught of Living Death and so had nothing to add.

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***Hogwarts***  
***12:50 p.m.***

As the students were exiting the Great Hall for their afternoon classes, Luna Lovegood called out to a severely distracted Harry Potter. He'd not heard anything from anyone about the Map and Remus Lupin's plans for it. Presently, he was hoping to get to Potions early enough to talk with Snape about the topic, and so was a bit put out at being diverted, even by a friend.

"Could I speak to you for second, Harry?" she asked with her usual dreamy expression. "In private?"

Before he could respond, he was interrupted by Pansy Parkinson, who had just exited the Great Hall.

"Yes, Harry!" she sneered "Why don't you go off for a private meeting with your Gryffindork girlfriend!"

Several of the other Slytherins nearby laughed at her humor, but Harry just rolled his eyes. Luna, on the other hand, furrowed her brow in confusion.

"Why did you call me a Gryffindork?" she asked with seemingly genuine curiosity.

"Because she's obnoxious, rude, and poorly-raised," Harry said with a sneer of his own for Pansy. In response, the Slytherin girl got ready for an insulting comeback, but Luna continued before she could speak.

"Oh yes, *of course* I know *that*, Harry Potter." The young girl turned back to Pansy. "But why Gryffind**dork**? Dork, after all, is a Muggle expression, a vulgar term for male genitalia. I was simply wondering where a Pureblood like you could have possibly heard it."

At that, Pansy's face went red with embarrassment, and she turned and fled. Once around the corner, she grabbed Cassius Warrington by the arm. "Tonight!" she hissed. "We're doing it *tonight*!"

A few seconds later, Harry and Luna were together in a hidden alcove.

"So, what's up, Luna?"

"A cardinal direction in 3-dimensional space," she replied in apparent seriousness. "But that's not important now. I have something for you." With that, she reached into her bag and pulled out a rather thick book.

"A gift, Luna? You shouldn't have."

"I didn't. It would hardly be proper to gift someone with a library book, now would it?"

Harry took the book, and his eyes widened in surprise as he read the cover: *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*.

"You got this from the Hogwarts Library?" he asked in surprise. The girl nodded.

"Given your ... *interest* in Oscar Wilde quotations, I thought you might want to read the source material. Particularly in light of who *owned* this book before leaving it behind upon graduation, at which point it was donated to the Muggle Literature section of the Library."

She reached over and opened the front page to show an inscription.

*"To my friend Tom. Think of this as a combined Christmas and Birthday present. My mum sent it when I asked her for a book you might enjoy and said you liked Dorian Gray. Happy reading. Love, Myrtle!"*

Harry stared at the message in shock. "This ... this book belonged to Tom Riddle?"

"Yes, I interviewed Moaning Myrtle about Tom hoping it might give me some insights into his connection with You-Know-Who. No luck there, but then I remembered your odd fascination for Wilde quotes and thought you might appreciate it. Or if not appreciate it, at least learn something useful from it."

Harry nodded silently, as he was strangely uncertain as to whether he should say "thanks" or not.

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### ***A Hogwarts Classroom*** ***7:15 p.m.***

This evening's SPAM meeting was well-attended with almost forty students present. Most were Muggleborns and Halfbloods, but there was also a smattering of egalitarian Purebloods, and every House and Year was represented. The only significant absence was the Gryffindor Quidditch team, as Oliver Wood had called an unexpected night-time practice session to "go over some new plays." Of the seven team members, four were in SPAM and three were not. The latter group included Oliver and Angelina (who were both in the Cultural Preservation Society, SPAM's ideological opposite) and George Weasley. Fred *did* attend SPAM meetings religiously after Hermione helped him out in

Potions, but the Twins avoided each other socially as much as possible, and anyway, George had become rather obsessive lately about doing better than Fred in Snape's class.

To Hermione's surprise, in addition to the usual food and drink, the house elves had apparently provided dessert in the form of a large sheet cake decorated with "SPAM" in bright green letters. Hermione did not have any herself, as she'd sworn off sweets of all kinds, but most those in attendance did. Harry even had a second slice. This proved to be an unfortunate life decision.

After a few minutes of casual chit-chat, Harry raised his hand to attract Hermione's attention.

"You haven't said yet," he began, "but what's on the agenda for tonight, Mudblood?"

Instantly, the entire room went deathly silent. Harry looked around in surprise.

"What?"

"Did ... did you just call Hermione a Mudblood, Harry?" asked a scandalized Su Li. In response, Harry grew visibly angry.

"I certainly did not!" he answered hotly.

"Oh yes you did," Ron spoke up, his face going red. "We all heard you call the Mudblood as a Mudblood!" He turned towards Anthony. "Didn't we, Halfblood?!"

The other boy's eyes widened in shock. "Did you just call me Halfblood, Blood Traitor?!" he said while rising out of his chair.



"No, I didn't," said as he rose in self-defense. "I called you Halfblood. That's your name, right? And how dare you call me Blood Traitor."

By this point, there was a cacophony of bigotry spreading across the room, as everyone who'd partaken of the SPAM cake (which had *not* been provided by house elves after all) was suddenly unable to use the proper name of anyone else in the room, replacing given names with various slurs. Then ...

**POW-POW-POW!**

Just before a fight could break out, Hermione shot off a round of fireworks from her wand.

"Alright, settle down!" she shouted. Then, she thought for a second and looked to Harry.

"Harry, say Ron's name out loud."

"Blood Traitor," he said casually.

"And mine?"

"Mudblood."

She sighed. "And your own?"

The boy looked at her as if baffled by her silly question.  
"Halfblood!"

Then, her eyes narrowed. "Say ... Pansy Parkinson, Cedric Diggory, and Cormac McLaggen."

"Pureblood, Pureblood, and Pureblood."

Hermione squeezed her brow with her fingertips in frustration. "Okay then, *everybody*, say my name!"

There was a chorus of "*Mudblood*" broken up by just six people who correctly said "Hermione." Further inquiry showed that those six were, like Hermione, not affected by the spell and, as it so happened, had *also* not eaten any cake.

"Right then," she said angrily. "We've been *pranked*. So, we're all going to march straight to the Infirmary and see Madam Pomfrey. Any questions? Good!"

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### ***Gryffindor Tower*** ***9:30 p.m.***

As Hermione Granger entered her dorm, it would not have been immediately obvious to her fellow Lions that she was incandescent with rage. After all, most of the people who really knew her moods were in the Infirmary, and at least two of them would be for the rest of the night. After a quick glance around the room, she spotted her quarry huddled in a corner with the rest of the Quidditch squad and a blackboard upon which Quidditch plays had been drawn. She marched over with her chin high.

"Hello, Oliver. How was your last-minute practice session?"

"Oh, um, fine," the Pureblood stammered. "Quite fine. Why do you ask?"

"I'm a Gryffindor. Can't I just be supportive of my House team the way you've all been so supportive of me despite my unfortunate Muggle upbringing?"

She turned to Jim and the Twins. "On a completely unrelated note, you three should probably know that Ron and Harry are in the Infirmary and will be spending the night there."

"What?!" Jim said, jumping out of his chair. "What happened?"

"Well, it was the funniest thing ... depending on your sense of humor, I suppose. You see, someone gifted our SPAM meeting with a cake that had been tainted with a potion that hexed everyone who ate any of it. A silly prank – you know how that goes. Anyway, it forced everyone who ate a slice to replace any proper names they would normally have used with vulgar blood-based terms. Mudblood, Blood Traitor, etc. I must say that I had quite a few laughs as a result of all my friends calling me Mudblood to my face. Very amusing. Although it wasn't *strictly* limited to blood-based slurs, it seems, as we learned when Ron started referring to Anthony and Su Li as '*kike*' and '*gook*' despite not even knowing what those Muggle racial slurs even meant."

"That's ... awful!" Oliver said lamely. George and Jim looked at Hermione in shock, but Fred had eyes only for Oliver, and he looked thunderous.

"Mmm, yes, quite awful. Of course, that wasn't the worst bit. You see, on the way to the Infirmary, several of the SPAM members became quite ill, a few of them violently so. It seems that whoever poisoned the cake got carried away and used quite a bit more of the potion than needed. Enough to cause allergic reactions in the people who'd had more than one slice. And, well, you know how Ron is with desserts."

She gave an exaggerated sigh. "I'm just glad that none of you lot were affected. Luckily, you were all at that surprise Quidditch practice that Oliver called at the last-minute before our SPAM meeting was supposed to begin. Otherwise, some of you might have eaten some of that cake and been hospitalized too!"

"... yeah ... that was ... good luck, I guess," Oliver said nervously while blushing furiously.

"You. Utter. Wanker!" Fred spat.

"Oliver," Katie asked in horror, "did you *know* about this in advance?!"

"Oh, he *more* than knew about it!" said Fred. George turned from Oliver to his twin in shock.

"Of for the love of ...! Please tell me, *brother of mine*, that you did not go behind my back and sell him a potion that would force innocent kids, including a lot of our friends *and* our little brother, to call each other bigoted slurs?!"

Fred drew himself up with as much dignity as he could.

"No, I didn't. What I sold this *git* was a potion that would have forced the members of the Slytherin Quidditch team to refer to one another as '*Doo-Doo Head*.' *And* I gave him clear instructions on dosages! He was the idiot who altered the formula without knowing what he was doing!"

"No I didn't!" Oliver exclaimed. "It was Diggory and Chang who did the alterations!" Then, he swallowed deeply as he realized his own confession. "I'm ... sorry anyone got put into the Infirmary. Truly. It was just a *joke*. Seriously. Just ... a joke."

"I don't want to hear any more from you, Wood," George said coldly. "You can explain yourself to McGonagall after I've made my report."

George was halfway to the door when Fred called out after him. "Hang on. I'll come with you. Pomfrey may want to know about the formula for that potion." He turned to Oliver for a second with a menacing glare. "Assuming the Jr. Death Eaters didn't modify it too much."

Oliver sputtered furiously at that, but the twins ignored him. George did give Fred a curt nod, which the other twin returned, and they left together. The rest of the Quidditch team left the humiliated Oliver Wood alone, with the Pureblood Angelina Johnson desperately trying to persuade her two fellow Chasers (both Halfbloods) that she'd known nothing about the prank.

By ten o'clock, most of the victims of the prank had been cured and released, but only four victims were so seriously affected by allergic reactions that they were kept overnight. One of them was Harry Potter, who spent the whole night in the Infirmary with no idea that a certain mirror in his bedside drawer was vibrating constantly and urgently.

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***26 March 1994***  
***Grimmauld Place***  
***Midnight***

Hidden in a dark alley, Peter studied the Marauders' Map and then looked up to the row of buildings across the street. Behind him were Fenrir, Stavros and the remainder of their pack – seven werewolves in all. In front of him stood Grimmauld Place, a once-stately row of townhouses that

had fallen on hard times. It was soon about to fall even farther.

"Hmm," Peter said speculatively. "Number 11 on the left. Number 13 on the right. But no Number 12. Oh well, I'm *sure* that was just an innocent mix-up. Take your positions, people. When I give the signal, target the houses numbered 11 and 13 *and everything in between*. Those of you who are not wizards, stay close to me. When Number 12 becomes visible, attack and kill every living thing you encounter."

Inside Number 12, the inhabitants were roused from sleep by the sound of strange deafening clanging that echoed through the house. Regulus and Sirius were the first to make it out of their bedrooms.

"What the hell is that racket?!" Regulus yelled while covering his ears with his hands.

"I don't know!" Sirius answered. "DOBBY!"

Instantly, Harry's house elf appeared with his usual aplomb. After noting Sirius's distress over the loud alarm, Dobby snapped his fingers and the clanging was suddenly barely audible.

"Thank you, Dobby," Reg said. "But what the hell was that?" By this time, Bellatrix and the Tonks family had joined the two brothers on the landing.

The house elf grimaced. "Regretfully, sirs, the defenses of the House of Black include a number of highly specialized warding techniques. Dobby knew that this particular clangity-clang would sound in some circumstance but could not tell what would trigger it."

Reg looked over to Sirius who sneered angrily.  
"KREACHER! YOUR LORD SUMMONS YOU!" he bellowed in a fury.

After a second, Kreacher appeared and glared sullenly at those present. "Nasty filthy Mudblood-loving traitors is wanting Kreacher for something?"

"Shut up and listen, you filthy beast," Sirius snarled. "You will tell me accurately and succinctly what the hell that alarm was for!"

Kreacher cackled. "Kreacher's beloved Mistress had it installed when she heard rumors you had become friends with a *disgusting rabid halfbreed*! Wanted warning if you ever brought it about ... so she could prepare a *suitable welcome*! That alarm is being the *werewolf detector*!"

Sirius blinked in confusion. "Does that mean ... Remus?"

"If so, oh *Great and Noble Lord Black*," Kreacher added contemptuously. "Your pet werewolf is not alone. The alarm rings *louder* the more disgusting werewolves are around."

Suddenly, the discussion was interrupted by a loud crack like thunder from above the building.

"What the hell was that?" Ted Tonks exclaimed.

Beside him, Bellatrix closed her eyes and swallowed fearfully. "That, dear brother-in-law, was the sound of the *Dark Mark*!"

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Outside, high above Grimmauld Place, floated the confirmation of Bellatrix's fears: a massive luminescent skull with a gigantic snake crawling forth from its mouth.

Peter smiled. While he wasn't really a part of Voldemort's cult of personality, he'd always held great admiration for the Dark Mark. It was a remarkably efficient tool of terror, capable of blocking both Apparation and Portkeys with a single spell. And besides, Peter came from a long line of dark wizards who appreciated the value of *pageantry*.

*"I do hope those idiot werewolves realize that this is The Signal,"* he thought to himself with a sudden frown. *"In retrospect, maybe I should have specified."*

His fears were alleviated a few seconds later, when the first Blasting Curse slammed into 11 Grimmauld Place, blowing its roof clean off. Immediately, more spells of mass destruction targeted both Number 11 and Number 13, and slowly, the *idea* of Number 12 began to form in Peter's mind. With a toothy grin, he raised his wand and added his own Bombarda to the chorus of destruction.

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## **BOOM!**

The people inside the house looked around wildly as explosion shook the building and a smattering of dust fell from the ceiling.

"We can't Apparate, can we?" Sirius asked Bella resignedly. She shook her head no.

"Nor can we use Portkeys, even assuming any of us knows how to make one," she added.

"No," Regulus interrupted, "but the Dark Mark does not affect Floo travel. We were taught to target locations known to have active Floos first on Death Eater raids. But they couldn't possibly know we even have a working Floo, so it should still be functional."



"Just how many *raids* did you go on, Cousin Regulus?" the younger Tonks asked archly.

"Just the one, Cousin *Nymphadora*," he replied blandly as he strode past her for the stairs. "And now is not the time to discuss it. Every second we delay brings us closer to our attackers punching through the wards and possibly damaging the fireplace. And then, we *will* be trapped!"

"But we can't just run!" Ted exclaimed. "There are Muggles in the houses around us! Muggles being killed as we speak! We can't just abandon them!"

"Ted," said Andromeda as she dragged her husband and daughter down the stairs. "Most of those Muggles are already as good as dead. The best thing we can do for the survivors now is to lure the Death Eaters away! They could only find this place due to some cursed map that apparently shows where Sirius is at all even when magically hidden! If Sirius leaves, they will follow!"

**BOOM!**

The whole building shook in response to the explosions. From somewhere in the distance, they could already hear screams, the sound of roaring flames, and the ringing of Muggle fire alarms. Sirius was first at the Floo, but then he hesitated and turned to Regulus.

"Where to, if they can follow me *anywhere*?" he asked almost despairingly. "We can't lead them to Longbottom Manor! That's where the Death Eaters are!"

Regulus closed his eyes tightly in thought. "It's the only option, Sirius. Lucius is in Paris with the ICW, so Longbottom Manor is the only other place we're connected to. But we won't be there for long, I promise."

Sirius nodded reluctantly and threw the powder into the fire. "Longbottom Manor!" he yelled, and the fire turned green. The Tonkses were the first through, but Bellatrix hesitated.

"Aside from us, there's a lot of Dark books and artifacts the Death Eaters would probably want. Walburga would have given it all to them years ago if Arcturus hadn't forbidden it."

"They won't get any of it," Sirius said darkly. She noted his stony expression and nodded.

"Don't do anything *too* stupid, Gryffindor," she said as she passed into the fireplace. "I've only just gotten my family back."

"Plan?" Regulus asked once the others were gone.

"Yeah, a Gryffindor one." He turned to the two house elves standing nearby, one ready for action, the other still sullen and crazed.

"Dobby," he continued. "Collect everything in the house pertaining to the Horcrux Hunt and everything that belongs to Harry and transport it all to Longbottom Manor. Then, wait there until I arrive."

"Also," added Regulus, "there's a magic mirror next to my bedside table that's connected to Harry's. Bring it too."

Dobby nodded respectfully and then popped away to fulfill his orders. Then, Sirius turned to Kreacher.

"Kreacher, as Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of Black, I give you these orders that you *will* obey. Go to my mother's portrait and wait until I give the command. Then,

transport my mother's portrait to the Black Family vault at Gringotts."

Kreacher growled. "Kreacher *cannot* obey filthy disobedient whelp's orders even if he *is* Lord of House Black! Mistress's painting is fixed and bound with a Permanent Sticking Charm that cannot be broken."

"I know it *can* be broken, Kreacher. And I know what the effects will be. I am *ordering* you to do it anyway. And you *will* obey!"

The mad house elf hissed angrily but then nodded. "Kreacher understands. And will obey." And then, with a snap of his fingers, he disappeared.

Sirius turned to Reg. "After you, brother."

Regulus stared at Sirius as if seeing him anew. Nearby, a window exploded into the room, but they both ignored it.

"As you command, my Lord. Don't dawdle." He stepped into the Floo and disappeared. Sirius looked around the parlor for the last time and felt a curious wave of nostalgia wash over him. For better or worse, this had been his home for most of his life. And while the bad memories far outweighed the good, that didn't mean there were *no* good memories.

From down the hall, there was a sudden loud crash as the front door was blasted off its hinges. Seconds later, the sound of several rasping snarls and growls could be heard as the partially-transformed werewolves entered looking for prey. For a second, Sirius thought about stepping out of the parlor to greet them, as a proper host should. And then, he laughed at his own Gryffindor foolishness before stepping into the fire.

"Do it, Kreacher," he said aloud. "Bring it down."

Upstairs in the attic, the mad house elf reverently put his hand on the frame of his beloved Mistress's portrait. Then, he raised his other hand and prepared to snap his fingers.

While wizards often speak of spells such as the "Permanent Sticking Charm," the truth is that *nothing* magical is truly permanent. Any curse can eventually be broken, and any Charm can eventually be undone if one is knowledgeable enough and persistent enough. The *real* secret to permanent magical effects, rather, is to make it so that the cost of ending the effect is higher than anyone is willing to pay.

It had only taken Sirius and Regulus a few weeks of research to finally discover the secret behind Walburga Black's seemingly immovable portrait. When the insane old witch was nearing the end of her mortal coil, she commissioned the portrait that would bring her image to a semblance of life through the Homonculous Charm after her passing. Then, she placed it in the entryway of her home with a Permanent Sticking Charm ... one that was irrevocably interwoven with the Spatial Expansion Charms that made 12 Grimmauld Place so much bigger than a house in its location could possibly have been. It was possible to end the former, but not without also ending the latter.

Kreacher snapped his fingers, and both he and his Mistress's portrait disappeared.

Downstairs, the werewolves led by Stavros had entered the main level of the house while Peter and Fenrir (who Peter had *ordered* to remain by his side) waited and watched from across the street. Once inside, Stavros's acute

werewolf senses swiftly alerted him to the nearby scent of Floo powder, and he rushed into the parlor in time to see the flames gutter and die. Then, he was startled by a deafening *CRACK* that somehow emanated from all around him ... followed by a terrible unearthly *groan* as beams, plaster, and floorboards all through the house warped and snapped. Being more knowledgeable about magic than the other werewolves in his company, Stavros had one terrible second to realize that something had just gone horribly (and fatally) *wrong*.

And then, the remaining exterior walls of 11 Grimmauld and 13 Grimmauld (which were still standing on either side of Number 12 even after those houses had been mostly destroyed) *slammed together* like the hands of a cruel child squashing a bug between them. To the horror of Peter and Fenrir, all the material that had once been part of Number 12's interior was squeezed into a fraction of its normal size before exploding outward in all directions. Peter didn't need magic to know that all the werewolves were dead – crushed and pulverized by the house's destruction.

Fenrir howled in impotent rage and moved towards the ruins of the house, but Peter grabbed him by the arm.

"NO, FENRIR!" the Animagus shouted. "They're gone!" Then, with a sudden pop, he Apparated the two of them to the roof of a nearby building.

"Nooo! My pack! My cubs!"

Despite the werewolf's larger size and obvious fury, Peter reached around and put his hand on Fenrir's face.

"I know, Fenrir, I know. Your cubs. Murdered by Sirius Black's treachery. But there's nothing to be done about that now. Nothing except claiming your revenge."

Fenrir snarled angrily before throwing his head back and howling loud enough to be heard from miles away. Already people were coming out of their homes to see what had happened, and those few who heard the werewolf's fury immediately ran back inside.

Peter stepped away from the grieving werewolf and pulled the Map out once more. Then, he cursed loudly.

"What, Peter?" Fenrir said morosely. "Don't tell me that after all that, we didn't even get him!"

"We did not, I'm afraid," Peter said grimly as he studied the map. "He's far to the north now. Lancashire, it looks like, though I can't tell where exactly."

"SO LET'S GET AFTER THEM!"

Peter shook his head sadly.

"I can't. You know what's happening tomorrow night. I'm sorry for the loss of your pack, but if our plan succeeds, you'll soon have a new pack. No, not a new pack - a new *army*."

Fenrir snarled with a murderous expression as he snatched the Marauders' Map out of Peter's hands. "Fine, Peter. Do what you need to do - while I hunt Sirius Black to ground *and feast on his beating heart!*"

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### ***Longbottom Manor, Lancashire***

Augusta Longbottom was on the scene almost instantly when the refugees from Grimmauld Place came through. And to everyone's surprise, she had a wand in one hand and

a crossbow in the other. Hoskins stood behind her with what appeared to be a loaded blunderbuss.

"What has happened?" she demanded.

"12 Grimmauld Place is gone," Sirius said. "It was attacked by a pack of werewolves who knew *exactly* where I was. I should have listened better to Harry's warning about the Map."

"But if you can be tracked so easily...?"

"We're not staying, Lady Augusta," Regulus said. "But if I might ask, could we trouble you for a pair of brooms?"

She grimaced. "Hoskins, bring the two best brooms we have."

"At once, M'lady," the elf said. "Though Hoskins must warn that the pickings are quite slim." He turned to Regulus. "Neither her ladyship nor the young master cared much for broom-flying. No new brooms have been purchased for Longbottom Manor since Master Frank was a boy."

"We'll take what we can get," Sirius said grimly. "Everyone else stay here and hunker down. I'll lead our enemies on a wild goose chase for as long as I can."

"We will lead them on a goose chase, brother," said Regulus. "You're still ill, and apparition would cripple you. You need back-up." Sirius started to speak, but his brother cut him off. "It's not negotiable, Sirius."

"So where are you two headed?" Bellatrix asked.

"I don't know," Sirius said quietly. "Just stay ahead of them as long as I can."

"No," Regulus replied. "We're going to Hogwarts."

"Why?" his brother asked.

"Because I think there's a place there you can hide even from your damnable Map!"

With that, Regulus stepped out of the room and found a private spot to pull out his magic mirror. But even after several minutes of calling out to Harry Potter, the one person who might possibly be able to get Sirius into the Prince's Lair without killing him in the process did not answer.

Moments later, the Black brothers mounted their borrowed brooms and left the grounds of Longbottom Manor heading in a northeastern direction. Such was their speed that as they passed over the nearby village of Chorley some fifteen miles from the Manor, Fenrir Greyback didn't even notice their passage until he checked the Map again and saw that Sirius was on the move.

He growled impatiently. It was a good thing that this close to the full moon, werewolves didn't need sleep.

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***The Great Hall***  
***27 March 1994***

The next morning, Madam Pomfrey released Harry and the others from the Infirmary, but he found himself ravenously hungry and so went straight to breakfast before heading up to shower and change into fresh clothes. He'd only just fixed a plate for himself when the morning's owl post delivery showed up, including his *Daily Prophet*. He took a bite of toast as he opened his paper and then immediately nearly choked on it.



***DEATH EATERS ATTACK ISLINGTON!  
THE DARK MARK SEEN ONCE MORE!  
12 MUGGLES DEAD! REMAINS OF  
WEREWOLVES FOUND AT THE SCENE!***

The headline was shocking on its face even without Harry's knowledge that Grimmauld Place was hidden in Islington in the very neighborhood mentioned in the article. He skimmed it quickly but it was sparse on useful details. Then, he glanced up at the sound of angry shouts coming from all over the Great Hall.

*"The Outcast had something to do with this! I know it!"*

*"Why are you blaming everything on Theo when he's been here the whole time?  
This was Death Eaters!"*

*"And now, the werewolves have joined them!"*

*"Sirius Black and Bellatrix Lestrange did this!"*

*"The same Sirius Black who attacked Hogsmeade on the same day that  
the Outcast unleashed Fiendfyre on the town!"*

*"That wasn't Theo! Don't be stupid!"*

*"You're awfully protective of No-Name? Are you on his side?"*

*"Why do you even care about this, anyway? It was just Muggles!  
I'm sure a noble Pureblood like you wouldn't care about them at all!"*

*"You take that back! I had family that died fighting in the last war!"*

*"Oh really? On which side?"*

*"You filthy little ...!"*

*"Finish that sentence. I dare you!"*

Suddenly, the cacophony which seemed poised to lead to violence was interrupted a single word "**ENOUGH!**" backed by the Sonorous Charm.

"Disgraceful!" Minerva McGonagall continued in a normal volume. "Disgraceful to think that our students should descend into such discord! Control yourselves at once or I shall cancel the morning classes and have everyone confined to your dormitories until you can act with some decorum!"

Then, Bobby Lattimer, the Head Boy, rose and got McGonagall's attention.

"Please forgive any impertinence on my part, Deputy Headmistress," the Hufflepuff said grimly, "but if classes are to be cancelled, would it be possible to arrange for the Muggleborns and those allied with us to stay somewhere other than our dorms? In light of recent events, some of us may no longer feel safe there."

As he said that last bit, Bobby glanced over at Cedric Diggory who had actually had the temerity to look offended at the comment.

"Are you suggesting, Mr. Lattimer, that the Heads of House are not capable of protecting *all* of their charges from

harm?" Pomona Sprout said with surprising coldness towards one of her favorite students.

Lattimer didn't back down. "I am suggesting, Professor, that some of your charges might feel safer than others, particularly since no one has *as yet* been punished for the events of last night that saw thirty students hexed and four put in the Infirmary."

"Mr. Lattimer," Minerva said firmly. "Investigation into that cruel prank is ongoing. However, if it will assuage concerns, then *no one* will be going back to their dormitories. You will all remain here in the Great Hall under observation by the Staff until tensions cool. And we shall take this morning to conduct interviews about that very incident to which you refer."

With that, she waved her wand, and the four long tables separated themselves into smaller round tables evenly spaced across the room. Then, rope barriers appeared that separated the room into three sections.

"Right then! Those of you who are members or supporters of the Society for the Prevention of Abusive Magic, please move to *that* side of the room! Those of you who are members or supporters of the Cultural Preservation Society move to the opposite side. Those of you who wish to maintain neutrality or simply *don't care* about this childish dispute please take a table in the middle!"

At that point, Harry stood and raised his own hand before being recognized by Snape.

"Two quick questions: First, if we'll be staying in here for a while, will we have an opportunity to go back to our dorms to get books? I, for one, came straight here from the Infirmary."

"We'll make arrangements to chaperone students who need to leave for any reason. What is your other question?"

"Well, it's not really a question. More of an observation. Pansy Parkinson got a Howler she's refusing to open. I think it'll explode soon."

At that, everyone on the Slytherin table who'd been distracted by the *Daily Prophet* and then by the SPAM/CPS dispute suddenly noticed that the Pureblood girl was staring wide-eyed and petrified at the sight of the red envelope that had been dropped in front of her by Hekate, her father's great horned owl. It was beginning to smoke.

"Miss Parkinson," Snape said authoritatively. "Open that Howler at once! Nothing is to be gained by dawdling!"

With trembling hands, she opened the letter, and the Howler sprang forth.

**PANSY PARKINSON!**

**I DO NOT KNOW WHAT ON EARTH YOU HAVE BEEN DOING AT THAT SCHOOL, BUT YOU WILL RETURN HOME THIS WEEKEND ON THE HOGWARTS EXPRESS! AND THEN WE WILL DISCUSS WHAT YOU WERE INVOLVED IN LAST NIGHT THAT HAS COST THIS FAMILY 20,000 GALLEONS IN UNDER AN HOUR! WHATEVER IT WAS, DON'T DO IT AGAIN!"**

**YOUR LOVING BUT ANGRY FATHER**

**ANDREW LORD PARKINSON  
LORD OF THE NOBLE HOUSE OF PARKINSON**

Hermione tried hard not to laugh when the Slytherin girl burst into ugly tears. She failed.

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Ten minutes later, Professor Snape personally escorted Harry Potter to the Slytherin dungeons. It was just the two of them, so Harry finally had a chance to get some information.

"So what's really going on?" he asked after looking around to be sure they were alone. "Are Sirius, Regulus, and the others okay?"

"Everyone is safe at Longbottom Manor *except* for Sirius and Regulus whose situation grows dire. They were attacked by a mixture of Death Eaters and werewolves last night. Twelve Grimmauld Place was utterly destroyed. Luckily, none of our people were injured, and several werewolves were slain. Presently, Sirius and his brother are on brooms and heading towards Hogwarts."

"Why here?" Harry asked in surprise.

"I do not know, Potter. Regulus contacted me early this morning via Patronus and asked me to have you contact him by mirror-call. He said he was unable to give details to me because of some oath, but that he could talk to you. I was unable to speak with you until now due to your injuries from that insipid prank."

By that point, the two had made it into the empty Slytherin dormitory and up to Harry's room.

"Um, sir? I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to wait out here. You see, I'm under the same oath Regulus is."

"*The Hydra's Oath, to be specific,*" he thought to himself. "*Man, I really wish Regulus had invited you into his circle when you were both at school. That would make things so much easier.*"

Snape sneered at the thought of being left to wait in a corridor like a common servant, but he said nothing as Harry ducked into his bedroom. The mirror was on the nightstand where he'd left it.

"Regulus? Are you there? It's Harry!"

"Where the hell have you been?" Reg hissed angrily.

He and Sirius were presently on the ground and hiding in an abandoned barn at the moment. Sirius was getting a few minutes of sleep. Since they'd left Longbottom Manor, they'd only been able to stay on the old brooms for a few hours at a time. But each time they landed, they only had about ten to twenty minutes before their pursuer – Fenrir Greyback, it seemed – tracked them down by apparation.

The deadly werewolf was incredibly fast and tough. Regulus was sure that nothing less than a Killing Curse would finish him, but Sirius had never successfully cast the spell, and Regulus was reluctant to do so. It still held bad memories, and as much as he hated werewolves in general, he worried his nerve might fail right as the beast was bearing down on him. In any case, Greyback was much faster and more intelligent than Eustace Tulley, and Regulus had doubts as to whether he could even hit Greyback before being eviscerated.

"I was in the Infirmary all night," Harry said. "Long unimportant story. So, are you heading to Hogwarts for the reason I think?"

Regulus hesitated. "Yes," he finally whispered. "Obviously, I haven't told Sirius yet, but if there's any place in Magical Britain that can hide itself from the Marauders' Map, it's got to be the Prince's Lair."

"I was under the impression that the room itself would *kill* any non-Slytherin who got in."

"That was my impression, too. But I think if we stun Sirius and keep him unconscious, the Lair might let us get away with it. Well, I *hope* anyway."

"That's still an awful risk," Harry said cautiously.

"I *know* that," Regulus snapped. "But have you any better suggestions?"

Harry paused and then smiled as another option popped into his head. "Yeah, actually, I think I do. Why don't we just put him in the Chamber of Secrets? That's not limited to Slytherins only. And it never showed up on the Marauders' Map either. It was built by Salazar Slytherin around the same time as the Prince's Lair, so it probably has the same magical protections!"

Regulus absorbed all that. Then, he stiffened as he heard a soft "pop" from somewhere out in the nearby woods. "Okay, we've got to move again. We'll be at Hogwarts as soon as possible."

Harry nodded and signed off. He'd have to figure out how to smuggle them into the castle as soon as possible. Only then would his godfather be safe.

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Meanwhile, back in the Great Hall, Jim Potter had taken up a position in the heart of the "Pro-Muggleborn" side of the Great Hall, along with Ron, Hermione, the Twins, and even Theo No-Name (with whom he started bonding over Wu Xi-Do discussions). It was not until half an hour later that he suddenly remembered he'd received an owl letter that

morning, one he'd been excited about at the time only to forget with all the drama that accompanied breakfast.

Stepping off to one side, Jim pulled the envelope from his pocket and retrieved the letter inside, taking a moment to smile over the familiar handwriting.

*Jim -*

*It's your Uncle Pete here. I've got some business at Hogwarts so I'll see you later today, but it's sort of a secret mission. Something for your dad. So please don't tell anyone I'm coming. Oh, and I need a small favor. I wouldn't impose, but it's for the Greater Good.*

*I need to borrow your dad's cloak.*

## Chapter End Notes

NEXT: It gets worse.

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P\*\*\*\*\*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2 (What the Sinister Man is reading):

(1) "Crime and Punishment" by mlocalis. A slow burn Severitus (mentor, no slash) in which Snape has a change of heart after finally noticing Harry's mistreatment by the Dursleys. I know some people find OOC Snape off-putting, but it's a well-done specimen of



the genre and does a great job dealing with Harry's psychological issues.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors: Adam Sitrich, Blackburne, darkphoenix31. FeatheryMinx, HeidiWolf, jelle814, jobberLast , Luc, Mr. Cato, NobodySpecial, ph0en1x, Pokeflute, ProfessionalDragonslayer, rdgbraz

# **The Hunting of Sirius Black (It Gets Worse!)**

## Chapter Notes

### SHAMELESS PLUG!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

## ***Chapter 37: The Hunting of Sirius Black (It Gets Worse!)***

***The Great Hall  
27 March 1994  
10:30 a.m.***

It had been several hours since the Deputy Headmistress had reconfigured the Great Hall in an unprecedented manner. For the first time in perhaps a thousand years, students in the Great Hall were not grouped by Houses. Instead, they were segregated roughly into three groups. The largest (about half the student body crammed into one side of the hall) consisted of those students in the grip of

the Ultimate Sanction, which had apparently extended its reach from just Theo No-Name to everyone who supported him. Those supporters (Muggleborns and Halfbloods with a smattering of "blood traitors") made up a third of the student body and were situated on the opposite side of the hall. Separating them was a No Man's Land of people neither affected by the Sanction nor moved to openly support the Outcast.

And perhaps most prominent among the denizens of No Man's Land was Harry Potter, who sat at a small table, reading quietly by himself. Blaise Zabini was sitting with the CPS students, which was troubling, but on the bright side, he was sitting between Ginny and Amy, who were Harry's spies within the Pureblood group.

Having completed all his assignments, Harry was working his way through *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* while trying to figure out why it had once held Tom Riddle's interest. Nothing had jumped out at him so far, though the number of witty Wilde quotes that seemed hauntingly familiar was disturbing. His reading was interrupted by a soft bell-like sound emanating from his book bag. He opened it up and, after a few seconds of searching, produced a crumpled piece of parchment with a message in Hermione's neat handwriting on it.

**Hermione:** *Hello, Harry. Come in, Harry. Over?*

Harry chuckled and looked over at Granger's table some fifty feet away. The witch was waving at him while sitting at a table with Theo, Jim, and Ron. He pulled out a quill to reply.

**Harry:** *I'm here. I'd honestly forgotten about this thing. We haven't used it all year. I'd have assumed the magic had*

*failed by now.*

**Hermione:** *I know. I'm taking every class that you are plus we're in a club together, so we haven't really needed any extracurricular communication this year. I was a bit surprised as well to see it still working. I suppose there's so much ambient magic at the school that Switching Spells last much longer. So, how are you feeling?*

**Harry:** *Still a bit queasy. And also embarrassed. I don't actually remember calling you that word last night. But I remember the shocked look on your face after I said it. I know it wasn't my fault, but I still feel bad about hurting your feelings.*

**Hermione:** *Well don't. It was a silly prank done by bigots, and you have nothing to be embarrassed about.*

**Harry:** *Not just bigots, though. Some of them are people who had nothing against Muggleborns before the Sanction happened. Do you know if Neville was in on it? Because that could be ... unfortunate.*

**Hermione:** *I don't think so. I saw him last night when people were coming back from the Infirmary, and he looked appropriately horrified.*

**Harry:** *That's reassuring, I suppose.*

**Hermione:** *Also, did you just add ellipses to a written message for emphasis?*

**Harry:** *... maybe?*

The next image to appear on Harry's parchment was a small drawing of a face with eyes whose eyeballs were looking up.

**Hermione:** *You probably can't tell, but this is me rolling my eyes at you.*

**Harry:** *Emotions are hard to convey through parchments, I suppose. You should invent a special language for parchment communication so that we can properly convey subtext to one another.*

**Hermione:** *I'll get right on that. Oh, on a completely unrelated note, do you happen to know the exact minute you were born?*

**Harry:** *Um, why?*

**Hermione:** *And now you're saying "um" in a written message to denote sarcasm? Anyway, it's a Divination project. I have to cast five horoscopes for friends, and they're more accurate if the moment of birth is precise. Or they would be more accurate if it weren't all nonsense.*

**Harry:** *I thought you were dropping Divination.*

**Hermione:** *I am. I was going to tell Professor Trelawney this morning, but class was cancelled for this mass study period we're all trapped in. But I'm still going to finish the last assigned project. I'll not have people say I quit because I couldn't handle the material.*

**Harry:** *That's our Hermione. Anyway, I was born on July 31, 1980 at 11:52 p.m. assuming the hospital clocks were right. I'm a Leo for what that's worth. Also, it's James Potter's birthday today if that has any cosmic significance.*

**Hermione:** *None that I'm aware of. But thanks, Harry. And I'm glad you're feeling better.*

Before Harry could respond, he was distracted when an unexpected guest joined his table: Marcus Flint.

"So, what'd I miss?" asked Hogwarts' only Eighth Year student as he studied the new seating arrangement.

"War between the Cultural Preservation Society and SPAM, apparently. First blood to the bigots. They pranked our meeting last night. For the most part, it was just an hour's inconvenience, but some of us, including myself, spent the night in the Infirmary puking our guts out."

"Nice. So how long is everyone stuck in here? I'm supposed to be teaching Patronus lessons this afternoon at 4, but if the school's still in lockdown, I'm going back to the Three Broomsticks to finish packing."

"Packing?"

"I'm heading to London this weekend for the holidays."

"Going alone?" Harry asked innocently.

Marcus blushed. "Not that it's any of your business, Potter. But I'm going with Emily Rossum. Perhaps when you're older and more mature, you'll understand such things."

Just then, McGonagall reentered the Great Hall and moved to the lectern in front of the Head Table. The other Heads of House stood beside her with stony expressions.

"May I have your attention please. The Heads of House have completed our investigation of last night's dangerous prank. Will the following students please stand: Cedric Diggory, Cho Chang, Oliver Wood, and Pansy Parkinson."

Slowly and with obvious reluctance, the four students stood as their names were called.

"After interrogation, these students have confessed to acting as the ringleaders of the contemptible prank that was played last night on fellow students, a prank born of bigotry and an irrational hatred of one particular student who is the victim of an unnatural and cruel magical curse. While I am convinced that other students were involved, they have refused to name any accomplices or co-conspirators, and no evidence implicating anyone else specifically has been brought forth. I will not take house points. It would be pointless to do so since there is one student implicated from each house.

"Instead, each of these students will have one month of detentions to begin upon their return from the Spring holidays. This detention will be served with *me* and, among other punishments, will include remedial instruction in *wizarding ethics* and proper behavior from Hogwarts students. Furthermore, Mr. Diggory's prefect privileges are hereby revoked for the remainder of the school year. Whether he is reinstated next year will depend upon his conduct for the remainder of this term."

Apparently prepared for the news, Cedric bore word of his demotion stoically, but there was a wave of shock and anger that passed over the CPS side of the hall. Indeed, several of the Slytherin students who Harry considered the true power within the CPS looked mutinous.

"Additionally, effective immediately, all student organizations are required to have a faculty sponsor, and organized meetings without a faculty member in attendance are henceforth *banned*."

At that, the murmurs of anger exploded into shouts of disapproval (mostly on the CPS side of the room), with several CPS members jumping up out of their chairs to protest the announcement. There were also some objections from the SPAM side of the hall, though less pronounced. For her part, Hermione seemed perfectly fine with the announcement, as she already had a faculty sponsor in mind.

A loud bang from McGonagall's wand silenced the arguments. "One final announcement: Fred Weasley, please stand and be recognized. Fifteen points are awarded to Gryffindor for Fred Weasley's actions in making a full confession of his own role in these affairs and identifying the ringleaders, as well as assisting Madam Pomfrey in curing those made ill by the prank. Lest anyone accuse me of House bias, the Heads of Houses are in unanimous agreement on this matter."

A stunned Fred sat back down, and George and Ron both clapped him on the back. The reaction was less positive among the CPS contingent, many of whom hissed at the awarding of points. Worse, one of them hissed "*blood traitor*" a bit too loud for his own good.

"And on the heels of that award, 10 points *from* Gryffindor for that remark, *Mr. McLaggen!* And a week of detention after the holidays!"

McGonagall took a deep breath to calm herself. "With that out of the way, classes are cancelled for the remainder of the day so that students may have a chance to reflect and cool down. They will resume tomorrow. I stress to you all: *No further violence or bullying relating to blood status or blood politics or to the Ultimate Sanction will be*



*tolerated!* I hope I have made myself clear. You are all dismissed."

Throughout McGonagall's remarks, Harry surreptitiously studied Neville Longbottom's reactions. He was gratified to see that his friend was nowhere near as belligerent as most of the CPS contingent seemed. If anything, he seemed embarrassed and offended at the prank and almost approving of the punishments levied against Diggory and the others, though he did sneer at the oblique references to Theo and the Sanction. On the bright side, Harry was still strangely reassured that his friend wasn't actually very good at sneering.

As the students were rising from their tables (some more surly about it than others), Harry leaned in towards Marcus. "I need your help with something. It's about ... our association."

Flint grimaced. "You better not screw up my romantic getaway, Potter."

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***The Third Floor of Hogwarts  
Near the statue of Gunhilda of Gorsemoore  
12:30 p.m.***

Hidden beneath the Potter Invisibility Cloak, Jim looked around to make sure no one was nearby before casting a quick Tempus. Then, following his godfather's instructions, he tapped his wand against the hump on the statue of an ugly witch that adorned this hallway and whispered "Dissendium." The statue slid to one side, revealing a passageway through which a brown rat quickly scampered.

Jim, who had never seen Peter in his Animagus form, grimaced. "I hope you're really Uncle Pete and not just an

ordinary rat. I don't want to get fleas."

The rat squeaked an indignant response, and a disembodied arm appeared in midair from underneath the cloak to carefully pick it up. Soon, the arm and the rat disappeared again.

A few moments later, Jim ducked into an empty classroom, whipped off his cloak, and gently placed the rat on the floor. A second later, Pettigrew stood in its place.

"Well done, Sport!" Pettigrew said as he pulled his godson into a warm hug. "I'm very proud of you!"

Jim snorted. "All I did was open a passage, Uncle Pete. It wasn't that impressive. But can you please tell me what's going on?"

Peter placed a reassuring arm on the boy's shoulder. "I can't tell you everything, Sport, because I don't *know* everything. But - and remember this is all hush-hush - according to what James told me, there was an incident this morning in London where most of a city block was destroyed by Death Eaters."

"I know. It was in the *Prophet*."

"Well, what the papers didn't say is that one of the destroyed houses was Sirius's childhood home. He was apparently hidden there this whole time, working on Merlin knows what dark magic along with the other escaped Death Eaters. It seems that something went wrong that destroyed the house's internal ward structure and caused the whole place to explode. Or maybe it was deliberate. The Aurors aren't sure yet, but the Dark Mark was used. But the important thing is that several werewolf corpses were found at the scene. And based on that and other evidence

that hasn't been publicly revealed, James thinks this proves Black and Fenrir Greyback are working together."

Peter's face grew pensive. "Sport, James thinks the Death Eaters may be targeting Remus Lupin tonight during the full moon. They've learned somehow about the potion he's been taking. Can you just imagine what Fenrir Greyback could do if he were lucid and intelligent while transformed?"

Jim was horrified. "That's awful!"

"That's why I'm here. Your dad is worried about Snape's involvement with the Wolfsbane Potion, and he asked me to keep an eye on him as only a rat with an invisibility cloak could do." The Animagus grinned at his little joke.

"You know about the Wolfsbane Potion!"

"Of course! I met up with Remus last month and he told me the Secret." Suddenly, Peter gave Jim a suspicious look. "Did he not tell you?"

"No, he never mentioned. Why? Wait, I know that look. What's wrong?"

Peter looked away for a moment. "Jim, please don't get upset, but your father also asked me to ... to keep an eye on Remus."

The boy looked offended on Remus's behalf. "Uncle Pete, I trust Remus completely."

"As do I, my boy. As do I. But if Fenrir Greyback is nearby, we must be careful. There are ... concerns that Fenrir could influence Remus mentally without him even being aware of it. Alternatively, even if Remus isn't under Greyback's

control, he'll be in a very emotional state due to the full moon. If he sees Greyback or Black, he might be overcome with an animal frenzy and become a danger to those around him even under the effects of the potion."

Then, his expression darkened. "Assuming the potion continues to work given who's brewing it. That's why I'm keeping an eye on Snape!"

"But ... Dumbledore trusts Snape! And he's been making Remus's potion all year long."

"Yes, *but without knowing it was for Remus*. Apparently, Snape now knows exactly what the potion is and *who it's for*! He was a Death Eater once. And he's *hated* Remus since we were schoolboys, just as he has your father. Do you not think that the Wolfsbane Potion might be *exactly* what he needs to buy his way back into his master's good graces?"

Jim didn't know how to respond to that.

"What do you need me to do?" he finally asked.

"Nothing, Jim," Pettigrew said firmly. "I know you're a Gryffindor through and through, but this is a job for *Aurors*, not students. Do you understand me?"

The man looked at his godson intently. "Jim, if you involve yourself or even tell anyone what I've told you, you could be putting both my life and your father's in danger. Do you want that?"

Finally, Jim nodded. "Okay. I guess I'll be turning in early tonight."

Peter smiled. "I promise I'll contact you as soon as possible if your father doesn't first. With luck, this whole Sirius Black mess will be *done* after tonight."

"You think so?"

The Death Eater gave a toothy grin. "Jim, my boy, I am *sure* of it!"

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### ***The Muggle Studies Classroom*** ***12:50 p.m.***

"Well, on one hand, I'll be very sorry to lose you in my class, Miss Granger," said Professor Potter, "but on the other, I'm surprised you stayed in as long as you did. At this point, you could probably sit the Muggle Studies NEWT with no problem, so I'm sure you've probably been incredibly bored in my class all year."

"You're a very engaging teacher, Professor Potter," Hermione said tactfully. "But to be honest, I think most of my enjoyment of the class has come from observing the reactions of Purebloods when you tell them something about Muggles they think is impossible."

They both laughed.

"I do wish you the best of luck, Miss Granger. And now that you're not a member of my class anymore ... well, if it's not too forward, I'd also like to say how grateful I am for what a good friend you've been to both my sons."

Hermione smiled at the compliment. It was not a genuine smile, but she was far too diplomatic, especially where a *teacher* was concerned, to bluntly tell Lily Potter to her face what she thought of the woman's parenting skills. Her

own parents might be careening towards divorce, but she was still confident her mother would never just walk away from her for any reason.

The young witch shoved those feelings aside. Right now, she needed something from the woman, and so long as Harry had no objections (and he'd said that he did not), she could smile and be polite to someone who had abandoned her best friend as a child in order to get it.

*"I think all my Slytherin friends are rubbing off on me,"* she thought to herself before speaking aloud.

"There was another matter. Related to your class, I suppose, though not really. Professor McGonagall announced today that student clubs would not be allowed to exist unless we had a faculty sponsor. I was wondering if you'd consent to be the sponsor for SPAM."

Now it was Lily's turn to smile, and hers seemed to be completely genuine. "I'd be *delighted!* And I've always meant to tell you what a *brilliant* acronym that was for a Muggle-focused organization!"

Hermione forced out a nervous laugh. "Well, you know what they say – what could be more Mugglish than *Spam!*"

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### ***The "Patronus Lessons" Classroom*** ***2:00 p.m.***

When Neville entered the classroom, he was mildly surprised to see Harry waiting there along with Marcus. The older boy had sent the Gryffindor a message to meet with him, presumably about the Patronus class, but he now suspected that wasn't the case.

"Before you say anything, Harry," Neville started, "I didn't know anything about that stupid prank, and I'd have tried to put a stop to it if I had. I reckon that's why they kept me out of the loop. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Nev," Harry answered. "And I'm glad to hear you say that. But that's not why I asked Marcus to invite you here. It's about what was in *The Prophet* this morning. I don't know if you realized it, but that was Sirius's house that was destroyed."

Neville's eyes widened in shock. "Is he okay? And what about Regulus? And the others?"

Then, he caught himself and looked around nervously. "Wait! Can we talk about this here?"

Flint nodded. "I checked the room with a Revelio. It's clean. And there's a Silencing Charm on the door."

Then, Harry responded to Neville's earlier questions. "The Tonkses and Bellatrix are safe. Sirius and Regulus are on the run. Unfortunately, it seems the Death Eaters who are after them have access to an enchanted map that can trace Sirius wherever he goes." Harry took a deep breath. "And so, they're both on their way here!"

"What?! Why?!"

"Our plan is to smuggle them into the school and then hide Sirius in the Chamber of Secrets. It doesn't show up on the Map. The problem is getting them into the school. There are several secret ways in, but I think the safest is the one behind the statue of Gregory the Smarmy. It's on the First Floor, but it's right across the hall from an internal secret passageway that leads up to the Second Floor and opens up near Moaning Myrtle's bathroom."

"How do you know about these secret passages, Harry?"  
Neville asked in amazement.

"Well, I wish I could say it was Slytherin cunning, but I have to confess that I learned about them from a variety of Gryffindors past and present. Unfortunately, while those passages are safest for Sirius *inside* Hogwarts, the entrance to the passage leading into the castle ... is in the Forbidden Forest."

"Are you *nuts*?!" Neville exploded. "How can that be the safest path into the castle?!"

"I said the same thing, Longbottom," Marcus said. "But hear Potter out."

"The entry point is hidden inside a fake tree stump. It's in a part of the forest that's relatively safe ... except for the hundred Dementors floating overhead, one of which apparently has a grudge against me. But Regulus knows the Patronus Charm. And luckily for me, I have some friends who know it too. We'll go down the passageway tonight at eight o'clock, meet Sirius and Regulus in the forest, and guide them into the castle together."

Neville said nothing but simply stared at him slack-jawed.

"Neville, I know how dangerous this sounds. I would never ask this of you if it weren't ...."

Suddenly, the Gryffindor broke out into a broad grin.

"Harry, shut up. *Of course*, I'll help!"

Flint snorted at the boy's eagerness. "Gryffindors!" he muttered.



"Honestly, Neville," Harry said almost irritably. "At least ... *think about it* before you volunteer for a dangerous mission."

"Harry! You were there to save me from Quirrell. You were there to save me from Bellatrix. And Sirius is a friend as well as your godfather. Nothing is going to stop me from helping you!"

"Neville," Harry said cautiously. "I'm grateful. But you need to understand – this may well be the hardest thing you've ever done. Definitely the hardest thing I've ever asked of you."

Longbottom gave a surprisingly cocky expression for such a normally humble boy. "You forget. You're looking at the youngest person ever to master the Patronus Charm."

Harry licked his lips nervously. "That ... won't be the hard part."

Then, the young Slytherin walked over to open the door to let a fourth person into the room: *Theo No-Name*.

The change in Neville's demeanor was instant and almost frightening. The genial grin fell away to be replaced by a glare of contempt if not loathing.

"What is *he* doing here?" the boy growled dangerously.

"Three Patronuses are good," Harry said. "Four are better."

Neville whirled around, suddenly angry at his closest friend. "You *told* him!"

"Only a little bit," Theo said calmly. "I know Harry's under secrecy oaths, as are you. But I've known since the end of

First Year that Harry thought Sirius Black was innocent. And if he says it, I believe it. Harry needs my help, so I'm there for him."

*"Just like I was there for you, Neville"* was the unspoken conclusion to that sentence, and both boys knew it.

"I told you this would be the hardest thing I've ever asked of you," Harry said. "I know how you feel about Theo ... and why. And I know most of the school feels the same. But what's at stake is more important than that. It represents everything we've been working towards for most of this year – freeing the innocent and punishing the guilty. So, for one night, I'm asking you – as a Gryffindor, as a Longbottom – to fight past your feelings about Theo and work with him for the Greater Good."

Neville said nothing at first, but he was nearly trembling with barely restrained fury. Marcus was so unnerved by the boy's transformation that he'd slowly begun reaching towards his own wand just in case.

Finally, Neville spoke. "Alright. For Sirius. And the Greater Good, I suppose." Then, he fixed Theo with a steely gaze.

"But understand this, Outcast. I will be watching you. And if you give me the slightest sign of betrayal, I will stun you, snap your wand, and leave you to get eaten by the Dementors. Understood?"

Theo nodded. Neville turned back to Harry.

"I'll see at you at eight in front of the statue," he said in a clipped voice. Then, he stormed out of the room, deliberately bumping into Theo's shoulder as he went. After the door slammed shut, Theo turned to Harry and smiled.

"I think that went *amazingly well*, don't you?"

Harry let out a long breath. "As well as could be expected, I suppose. Come on, both of you. We need to make some plans."

Harry and Theo exited the room. Marcus followed behind, pausing to look back around his "classroom" one last time.

Thirty seconds after their departure, the door opened on its own and then closed again.

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***The Corridor leading to the Divination Classroom***  
***2:45 p.m.***

"Professor Trelawney!" Hermione called out to the Divination instructor. She was pleased to catch the woman outside of her classroom. The smell of incense frequently made Hermione feel queasy, and she would be happy to never need to climb a ladder to get into class again.

The older witch turned around, and her eyes widened behind her thick glasses.

"Miss Granger! Whatever is the matter, my child! Have you had a vision?!"

"No, Professor," Hermione replied. "I just wanted to give you my horoscope assignment since we didn't have class this morning."

"Oh, my dear! Your enthusiasm for the divinatory arts is truly inspiring. But this was unnecessary. Class was canceled this morning – as my Inner Eye warned me of last night. I saw a flock of whippervills take flight just before sunset, and the dregs of my teacup were most alarming.

And so, I had already decided to cancel my class and let you all turn in your horoscopes after the Easter Break before Professor McGonagall canceled *all* of today's classes."

Trelawney sniffed. "I should have warned her ahead of time that such would be necessary, but poor Minerva so rarely appreciates my insights."

"That's ... unfortunate, Professor," Hermione said diplomatically. "But the thing is ... I wanted you to have my project now ... because I won't be returning to Divination after the Break. I've decided to drop the class."

Trelawney gasped in shock. "But Miss Granger! Your talent! Your gift!"

"Professor, I'm sorry, but I must. I'm ... truly grateful for the ... understanding of the validity and importance of Divination that only a Seer of your wisdom could provide."

Hermione paused, perhaps to see if lightning would strike her for such a blatant lie. Then, she continued.

"But the truth is – on our first day of class, you predicted that one of us would leave forever before Easter. I now know that the person you spoke of is me. I've had several premonitions over the past several days. Premonitions that hint at the dangers of my continuing in your class. I don't know how or why or when, but I just know that if I continue, it will lead to ...."

She paused and took a deep breath. "Dooooom!"

Trelawney placed her hand over her mouth in shock. "Oh, my dear child. Yes, yes, of course. You cannot ignore your Inner Eye when it gives warnings of such clarity. You *dare* not. And now that you mention it, I too can see the

tendrils of fate whirling about you, warning of the same dangers that you have seen."

"Thank you for understanding, Professor," Hermione said with as much sincerity as she could muster.

*"Honestly, I don't know how Harry and Blaise do it!"* she thought to herself.

"Good luck to you, Miss Granger."

With that, Sibyl Trelawney turned and headed on to the ladder leading up to her classroom, while Hermione turned away, relieved at last to have *that* complication to her life over with. But then, before she'd gone more than a few feet, Trelawney suddenly called out to her again.

"Miss Granger!"

Hermione turned back to see Trelawney, now with an odd unreadable expression on her face.

"Yes, Professor?"

The woman took a few steps towards her while looking around as if to make sure no one was listening in. Then, she slipped her glasses down and looking at her over the rim.

"Miss Granger ... just between us ... are you truly...." Then, she paused suddenly and simply stared at Hermione.

After several seconds of this, Hermione spoke up. "Am I truly *what*, Professor Trelawney?"

Trelawney continued to stare for several more seconds before shaking her head and turning away without answering.

"No, not yet," she muttered to herself while heading for the ladder. "It's not time yet."

Hermione watched the strange woman as she started up the ladder before shrugging her shoulders and heading back the way she'd come.

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***Severus Snape's personal laboratory***  
***4:15 p.m.***

Somewhat unusually, Severus Snape found himself in a bit of a rush. With everything that had been happening with his co-conspirators, he'd almost forgotten about the Wolfsbane Potion which had to be completed soon. Dumbledore wasn't on hand to convey it to its intended recipient, but he'd left word to deliver the completed potion to the caretaker, Mr. Sturgeon, who in turn would deliver it to Snape's literal *bête noire*, Remus Lupin. Of course, Mr. Sturgeon himself had also disappeared, having run off to deliver the Marauders' Map to a secret Death Eater.

*"Imbecile,"* Snape thought uncharitably. *"I wouldn't be surprised if Pettigrew's already killed him! Which, morality aside, is a damned inconvenience."*

Happily, Minerva's decision to cancel classes for the day had been fortuitous, allowing Snape to catch up on his brewing. He was just about to decant the potion. Then, with no other options, he would send his Patronus to Albus and find out where Remus Lupin was. While he'd said forcefully that he had no desire to meet the werewolf again after all these years, he now knew that Lupin had been completely innocent in The Prank, and, in any event, he would not want to see innocents harmed by a werewolf driven mad without Belby's potion.

Suddenly, his reveries were interrupted by the sound of glass shattering in the next room. He finished pouring the Wolfsbane potion into a goblet before dispelling the many locking wards on his laboratory door (it would not do to be interrupted while working with the highly toxic ingredients of this particular potion) and stepping out into the Potions classroom. He glanced around the room suspiciously and then noticed to his surprise that a small rat was sitting on a lab table. Apparently, it had knocked an empty beaker to the floor.

Snape pulled his wand out and prepared a spell useful for banishing vermin out of the castle and onto the grounds, but then he hesitated. Sirius had been oathbound against revealing too much about the Marauders and their status as Animagi, but he'd revealed a few things, and certainly a name like *Wormtail* was suggestive. The Potions Master took a few steps towards the rat which simply looked at him without fear. Slowly, he raised his wand.

"***HOMENUM REVELIO!***" he said, but the spell gave no indication of anything unusual about the rat. Snape exhaled and shook his head at his own paranoia ... right before the red light of a silent Stupefy slammed into his back. The Slytherin dropped instantly to the ground. Behind him, the Potter Invisibility Cloak was tossed aside to reveal Peter Pettigrew bearing a triumphant expression.

Casually, he strolled over to the table and gently picked up the rat.

"That was *perfect!*" he said as he tickled the rat's whiskers. "Aren't you just the smartest little thing! And *cute* too!"

As he praised the rat, Peter produced a small hunk of cheese from one of his pockets which he fed to the rodent.

Then, he balanced the rat on his shoulder before grabbing Snape by the heels and dragging him back into the private lab. Once inside, he locked up the room with several spells before performing a quick search of the premises. In a storage locker, he found what he was looking for: a vial of clear liquid marked "*Veritaserum*."

A few minutes later, a groggy Severus Snape was bound to a chair and answering Peter's questions with a slurred voice. He talked for a good ten minutes. Despite the Veritaserum, he had nothing to say about the Azkaban escapees and the cabal that had freed them. To Peter's surprise, he did claim to still be a loyal follower of the Dark Lord, though Peter was well aware of what a good Occlumens forewarned could do to avoid getting caught on *that* topic.

Hell, *Peter himself* was a good enough Occlumens to deny being a Death Eater under Veritaserum, so he assumed Severus was good enough for his answers about such questions to change according to the interrogator. Or perhaps Snape *really* was a loyal Death Eater. Which would not stop Peter from killing him – the fewer competitors for Voldemort's favor the better, after all.

Happily for Pettigrew, though, Snape had not bothered to construct an Occlumency defense for his work with the Wolfsbane potion, and so the Potions Master had plenty to say about that topic. At the end of the interrogation, Peter pocketed the complete formula for Damocles Belby's Wolfsbane Formula along with the sample meant for Remus Lupin, which Peter had transferred to an unbreakable glass vial.

Then, he turned back to Snape with one final question. "Tell me, Snivellus, with the stuff you currently have on the boil



in here, what ingredients do you have lying around that I could add to a potion that would produce deadly toxic fumes while giving myself time enough to get away?"

"The Potion of Dreamless Sleep in the third cauldron. Dump the aconite in and turn the burner up to maximum. When the potion comes to a boil, it will be quite deadly to any who breath the fumes."

"Thank you, Snivellus. It's always good to receive advice from a true professional."

Then, Pettigrew stunned Snape once more before following his directions to the letter. In the floor nearby was a sluice grate for pouring out failed potions. The bars were too close for a person to fit through, but just the right size for a rat. Peter removed the rat from his shoulder (where it had been resting peacefully the whole time) and dropped it down through the grate. Then, he took a moment to retrieve the Invisibility Cloak, fold it up, and drop it through the opening as well, before following along in his Animagus form. Behind him, Severus Snape lay unconscious on the floor as menacing black fumes began to rise from the cauldron.

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***The Office of Chief Auror James Potter***  
***4:50 p.m.***

James had just tossed back his third headache remedy of the day when the small compact mirror in his pocket started to vibrate. So far, his 34th birthday had not been one of his better ones. Things started off badly at 4:00 a.m. when he was summoned to the ruins of Grimmauld Place. To James's embarrassment, now that it was in the news, he actually remembered Sirius joking that his family lived in "a grim old place," but he'd never realized that his former

friend had been making a *pun* on the actual name of the Black home.

*"And to think," James ruminated, "if I'd remembered that detail at the start, we might well have caught the escapees months ago!"*

Minister Fudge and Director Bones had both been after him all day long for "results," and the *Daily Prophet* was in fine form as usual. Even Rita Skeeter, who'd given the Potters such good press over the years, had made several snide comments about the failures of the Auror Corps in dealing with the Death Eater Menace in her most recent coverage.

After swallowing the headache potion, an exhausted James reached into a pocket and pulled out the mirror compact, the one Peter had given him years before for "emergencies."

"James Potter," he said into the mirror.

"It's Peter."

"Hey, Pete! Listen, I've been meaning to call you. I know we were planning to go out to the Leaky Cauldron for a round of birthday drinks tonight, but I'm not going to be able to ...."

"I'm not surprised with what's been in the papers," Pettigrew replied. "But that's not what I'm calling about. When can you get away from work?"

"Probably not for a few hours, given everything that's happened. Why, what's up?"

Peter spoke quietly and secretively. "Are you alone?"

James looked around the office just to be sure and then fired a silencing spell at the door. "Yes. What's the matter?" he asked with some concern.

"I can't talk freely where I am. It's too risky. I need you to meet me at the Shrieking Shack tonight at 6 p.m. precisely. Find some excuse to get away and *come alone*."

"Peter, it's been a long day, and I'm really not in the mood for intrigue. What in Merlin's name is going on?"

"*James*, I promise I would tell you if I could, but you need to see it for yourself. I found out something. Something big. It involves Sirius ... and the rest of the Marauders. And *Jim*."

James sat up straight, suddenly alert. "Jim? What about Jim?"

"Six o'clock. The Shrieking Shack. Be discrete. I can't say anything more now."

James sighed. "Okay, I'll finish up here and travel up to the Three Broomsticks in time to meet you at six. But Peter ... this better be worth it."

Peter ended the call and closed the compact before grinning in anticipation. "Prongs, old boy? You better believe that what I have in store for you will be *worth it*."

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***The Hogwarts Foyer***  
***5:00 p.m.***

Harry was headed to the Great Hall for dinner when he caught sight of Marcus Flint standing in the foyer. Flint made brief eye contact with him before heading out the main door. Figuring that Flint needed to talk to him

discretely, Harry followed. Sure enough, Flint was waiting for him on the front porch of the castle.

"What is it?" Harry asked quietly.

Flint looked around carefully. "Snape's still coming with us tonight, right?"

"As far as I know."

"So do you have any idea why he'd be going off with that Pettigrew guy who you told me is a secret Death Eater?"

Harry stiffened in surprise. "Pettigrew's *here*? And Snape's with him?"

"Yeah, I just saw them heading that way." Flint frowned while pointing around the side of the building. "Well, I say together. Snape was walking in front with Pettigrew close behind."

"How long ago?" Harry asked nervously,

"Just a few minutes."

Harry frowned. "Come on."

He took off in the direction Flint had pointed, and the older Slytherin followed behind. Once around the corner, Harry saw there was no sign of Pettigrew or Snape, but in the distance, he could see the Whomping Willow. To his surprise, it was stilled for once, and then, he remembered that the Marauders had a way to immobilize the tree so that they could access the passageway hidden beneath it. Harry took off towards the tree, but it began to thrash around when he drew close.

"Okay, there's a way to calm the tree down and also to open up a secret passage at the bottom. But what is it?"

"There's a knot at the bottom you have to either press or hit with a Stunner," Flint supplied.

Harry's brow furrowed, and he turned towards the older boy. "How did you know ...?"

**"*STUPEFY*."**

There was a flash of red light, and Harry dropped to the ground. Flint looked down at him with a glassy expression. Then, he pulled the smaller boy up over his shoulder into a fireman's carry and headed towards the Whomping Willow to fulfill his orders.

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### ***The Shrieking Shack*** ***6:00 p.m.***

James Potter surveyed the Shrieking Shack grimly. He'd come here at the urging of his most trusted friend and confidante, but now, looking at the building that had been such an important part of his youth, he had a strange sense of unease. Cautiously, he walked up the steps to the front porch.

By design, none of the doors or windows of the Shack were functional, and officially, the only way in or out was through the tunnel leading to the Whomping Willow. But James Potter was accustomed to going where he wanted, and so he transfigured several of the boards covering one of the ground-floor windows to be transparent. Then, he peeked through and saw there was now enough light even as the sun was going down to see the gloomy interior. Gripping his

wand tightly, James Apparated inside before restoring the boards to their normal opacity.

"**LUMOS**," he said quietly, and a light from the tip of his wand illuminated the filthy room. He looked around slowly. It had been so many years since the former Marauder had visited the Shrieking Shack – definitely not since graduation. Still, he'd expected some feeling of familiarity, if not nostalgia. Instead, the man was struck by what he could only describe as an overpower sense of **un**familiarity, a sensation that he'd never been here before even though he knew otherwise. He wondered if the French had a name for the sensation.

"Ah! You're here!" James jumped at the sound and then turned towards Peter Pettigrew, who'd entered the room with his own wand lit.

"Yes, Peter. I'm here. Now would you kindly explain *why* I'm here?"

As he spoke, James took a step forward but was then startled when his foot hit something. He looked down and pointed with his Lumos-lit wand. It was a small cracked brass orb that rolled across the floor towards Pettigrew, who reached out with his own foot to stop its movement.

"What is that?" James asked out of curiosity.

"I believe it's called a Recording Orb," Peter answered as he knelt to pick up the orb. "They're used by the Department of Mysteries to, well, *record* things. That one, obviously, is broken and got left behind back in '79."

James looked from the cracked orb to Peter and back again in confusion. "Peter, what are you talking about? What the

hell is an Unspeakable's *Recording Orb* doing in an abandoned building?"

"Walk with me, James," Peter said as he turned and headed further into the building, toying with the orb idly as he spoke. "Tell me, my old friend. What do you actually remember about this place?"

James followed, looking around as he did. His peculiar sense of *unfamiliarity* only grew.

"I remember the Headmaster would lock Remus in here every month so he wouldn't hurt anyone. I remember us finding Remus here and resolving to help him by becoming Animagi. I remember saving Snivellus's miserable life during The Prank. And I remember the three of us letting Remus out once we'd mastered our transformations so we could all romp around in the Forbidden Forest."

He paused and frowned.

"Which in retrospect was an incredibly stupid and irresponsible thing to do," he finally said. "But what does that have to do with ... with whatever we're here for? And what does it have to do with Jim?"

Peter turned back to him. "James, every single memory you have of this place ... is a *lie*," he said flatly. "The *truth* is that Dumbledore didn't just lock Remus in here. This was where *experiments* were performed on Remus with his consent. This was where we were *taught* to become Animagi in furtherance of those experiments."

"What?! What madness is this Peter? Why don't I remember any of that?"

"Memory Locks, of course!" Peter answered. "You have a whole slew of them. As do I."

"Impossible!" James spat. "I handle Remembralls all the time! I'd know if I had any Memory Locks on me!"

"No, James, you would not. Because the Unspeakables have access to a potion that can cause all forms of memory Charms to be undetectable by Remembralls and thus not subject to being undone by Remembralls." Peter grinned suddenly. "Trust me, Prongs. I am *very* familiar with the potion in question."

James studied his friend in confusion. Something about Peter's attitude was troubling, but James wasn't sure what it was.

"So, when did you find out about these so-called Memory Locks? And how?"

At that, Peter's grin grew even wider, unsettlingly so. "I don't know all the details, but I was told all the important facts several years ago."

"By who?" James asked suspiciously.

"By my best friend, James. His name is *Mr. Nemo!*"

Upon hearing that name of the infamous Death Eater whose cursed book had nearly driven his younger son mad, James's face lit up in anger, and with a soft *snikt*, his wand fell into his hand.

**"STUPEFY!"**

There was a flash of red light ... and James Potter dropped to the floor. Behind him, Marcus Flint pulled off the



Invisibility Cloak and let it drop. He stared at the Chief Auror with the same glazed expression he'd worn when he betrayed his friend Harry less than an hour before.

Peter smirked cruelly as he casually tossed the orb over his shoulder. It landed in the next room with a soft crash.

"Well done, Mr. Flint. Well done, indeed. If things were different, I think you'd make a fine Auror. Of course, if things were different in other ways, you'd make an equally fine Death Eater. Alas, Fate is a cruel bitch."

Pettigrew took a moment to reinforce the Imperius Curse he'd put on Marcus earlier that afternoon and then fired off an Incarcerous that left James Potter bound tightly.

"Put him with the others," Peter commanded. As Marcus complied, Peter bent down to claim James's wand, which he pocketed. Then, he pulled another mirror out of his pocket – a different mirror than the one he'd used to contact James earlier.

"Fenrir, it's Peter."

Seconds later, the fearsome werewolf's face appeared in the mirror. He seemed distressed, almost feverish.

"P-Peter. Where are you? M-Moonrise is coming. If I can't catch them before I ch-change, I'll lose them."

"Forget them for now, my friend. Apparate immediately to the Shrieking Shack in Hogsmeade. I know where they're going and when. And I have a little something for you. Something that will make your hunt go much smoother."

With his free hand, he reached into a different pocket and pulled out the vial of Wolfsbane Potion. "Something that's

going to change *everything*!"

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Ten minutes later, Fenrir Greyback was at the Shrieking Shack holding a large glass vial in his hand and staring at it in amazement.

"And you're sure this will work, Peter?"

The Animagus shrugged. "Not really. But there's no time like the present to try it out, my friend. If nothing else, I'm sure it won't hurt you."

After a brief hesitation, the werewolf pulled the stopper and downed the Wolfsbane Potion in one big swallow. Then, he grimaced in disgust.

"Well, *that* tasted like crap."

"I'm sure. But the effects are what matter. How do you feel?"

Fenrir blinked a few times. "Not sure yet. I feel ... different. Maybe a little more ... *focused*?"

"Well, I wish we could test it under controlled circumstances, but we're short on time. Sirius will be in the forest soon. He'll be making for the fake stump I told you about. Him and his accomplice, who is *apparently* the long-dead Regulus Black!"

"So what's the plan?"

"It's not a very complicated plan, Fenrir, compared to my usual efforts. Just kill them both, along with any Hogwarts students who show up to assist them. Leave the bodies near the Acromantula colony so there will be no remains. Oh, but

if it's at all possible, save me Sirius Black's head. I may be able to use his hair for Polyjuice purposes even after he's dead."

Fenrir snorted. "Knowing you, I'm surprised you don't want to have it stuffed and mounted on your living room wall."

"Please! Like I want to see *that* ugly mug every day. Right then, you've had your potion, so off you pop to the Forest. Your Change will come in less than twenty minutes. But first, give me the Map. I may have a use for it later, and I don't want it getting lost when you transform."

Fenrir nodded and handed the Map over before Apparating out of the Shack. Peter looked around the room as if taking roll. James and Harry both lay against one wall, bound and unconscious with their arms tied behind their backs. James in particular bound with some very special cuffs that Peter had acquired for just this purpose. Remus lay against the other wall, still under the effects of the Draught of Living Death that Peter had snuck into his tea when they'd met in his office the day before. Marcus Flint stood against a wall with a vacant expression, still under the effects of the Imperius Curse.

Flint's involvement was a last-minute improvisation. Peter had been stalking Harry invisibly that afternoon, waiting for a chance to strike when, to his astonishment, he chanced to overhear a conversation that revealed Harry Potter's direct involvement in the Azkaban breakout! He'd almost panicked when Flint hit the room with a Homenum Revelio looking for eavesdroppers – he'd had no idea that the Potter Invisibility Cloak was strong enough to block that spell. Certainly Dumbledore had not had any difficulty spotting the Marauders when hiding under the Cloak. Perhaps Flint

had just cast it improperly. Or maybe Albus was just that good.

In any case, after hearing that conversation, Peter modified his plan. He followed Flint out of Hogwarts and back to Hogsmeade and put the boy under the Imperius there rather than risk using an Unforgiveable on Hogwarts grounds. Then, he attended to poor old Snivellus before coming here to meet James. Peter pulled a pocket watch out of his vest and checked the time.

"Right," he said to himself. "Showtime."

In swift order, he poured a vial of the Wiggensweld Potion down Remus's throat to counteract the effects of the Draught of Living Death before casting Renervation Spells on James and Harry.

James woke up first and looked around groggily. "Peter? Peter! What the hell is going on?!"

Harry awoke as well but said nothing while using his Occlumency to clamp down on the impulse to panic. He did note Marcus standing nearby with a vacant expression that he assumed correctly was the result of the Imperius Curse.

"What's going on, Prongs? Well, it's simple. You see, tonight, we have finally reached that moment in the drama when the villain casts his mask aside and reveals his diabolical nature."

"Peter?" Lupin said weakly. "What ... you drugged me?"

"Yes, my friend, I did. Though I promise it was for your own good ...." Pettigrew stopped abruptly as Remus's name seemed to stick in his throat.

"Ah, silly me. The Fidelius! We can't proceed to the villain's monologue until we've introduced all the other players!"

With that, he pulled a scrap of parchment from inside his jacket and carried it over to where both James and Harry could see it. It was the Secret.

James looked at "Malachi Sturgeon" in shock. "You're really *Remus Lupin*?!"

Harry was shocked for a different reason. "You're a *werewolf*?!"

As the last piece slipped into place, Harry cursed the effectiveness of the Fidelius Charm. Now that he knew the Secret, he could clearly remember all the times he'd literally been *told* that Lupin was a werewolf and then promptly forgotten it or ignored the evidence.

James struggled ineffectually against his bonds. Alastor Moody had railed constantly about the need for a good Auror to know at least a few wandless spells, especially Accio and Finite Incantatem. Now, James regretted not listening to his former mentor's advice. When he couldn't break the bonds as a human, he closed his eyes in concentration. But then, they popped back open in surprise, and he hissed at the sharp pain in his wrists. Pettigrew noticed his discomfort.

"I'm guessing you just realized you can't change forms, eh, Prongs? Yes, I thought it might be problematic to have you prancing around while I was trying to talk, so I put you in some shackles marked with the same runes you had inscribed all over poor Sirius's cell."

"Peter, please. What's going on here? Are you under the Imperius? Are you being blackmailed?"

"No," Harry spat angrily. "He's just *the bad guy*."

Peter snorted at that. "Prongs, this is me, really and truly. Nearly fourteen years ago, I decided that I could do better for myself than being James Potter's '*pet project*.' The poor lackey that you only tolerated out of *pity*." As he spoke, Pettigrew took off his jacket and then rolled up his sleeve. "And so, I made *a choice*. And I have never once regretted it."

As he spoke those last words, a tattoo of the Dark Mark slowly materialized on his arm. James was speechless.

"You ... you were a Death Eater?" Remus said disbelievingly.

"Yes, Remus," he said smugly. "And it's a good thing for you I was! You were a decent spy, but not a great one. At my request, however, Fenrir Greyback overlooked your lapses and ensured that none of the other werewolves ever found you out."

His expression changed to one of genuine affection. "You're my best friend, Remus, and I would never have let you come to harm."

"This is insane!" James yelled. "Dammit, Peter! We're friends! We always have been! How could you have turned on us?!"

"Oh grow up, Prongs," Peter said impatiently. "We were *never* friends. Not really. Remus and I were friends. You and Sirius were friends, sort of. Though personally, I'd describe it more as a sort of weird and slightly homoerotic co-dependency relationship in which two inveterate bullies bonded over a shared taste in victims. And outside of us, you've never really had anything even *close* to a friend."

"That's not true!" James exclaimed. Beside him, Harry rolled his eyes.

*"As if this is the time to get mad because someone challenged your popularity when in school!"* he thought to himself.

"I'm sure you believe that, Prongs," Peter said almost pityingly. "But the James Potter I knew at Hogwarts divided the whole world into two groups. Group one consisted of those who were in a position of authority over him, those who had something he wanted, and those who were impressed with his exploits and happy to cheer his name. That group got the full measure of the Potter Heir's charm. *Group two* consisted of those who were *not* impressed by him and who had nothing to offer that he wanted. And *that* group got treated as enemies to be crushed with mean-spirited pranks and belittling insults. Naturally, I decided two weeks after we met that my best chance to avoid seven years of *misery* was to get myself into group one, as soon as possible, which I achieved by signing up for the role of *Potter's Minion and Chief Whipping Boy*.

"Of course, at the time, I didn't fully appreciate the nature of my role in the group. I naively thought we were equals, even if *you*, Prongs, were always *first* among equals. I owe it to Sirius Black for showing me the truth. I hope he appreciates how I've repaid him."

James's face darkened. "You and Black! You *both* betrayed us to You-Know-Who!"

At that, Harry finally snapped. "Oh for *God's sake*! Sirius Black was *never* your Secret Keeper. It was *always* Pettigrew. He Memory Charmed you to think it was Sirius who betrayed you!"

"Impossible!" James spat.

"Oh no, James," Peter said merrily. "It's more than possible. I tricked Sirius into thinking that I was the best choice for Secret Keeper because no one would suspect a '*pathetic little weakling*' like me. And then, Sirius persuaded both you and Lily to make the switch to me without telling anyone else. It was all I could do not to laugh. Of course, I had to improvise quickly when Jim vanquished the Dark Lord. Luckily, I had a supply of the Unspeakable Potion I mentioned earlier. It's a genuine potion that's used by the Unspeakables to conceal their most secret activities, and Mr. Nemo got me a few samples, one of which I used on you the night the Dark Lord attacked your family."

Pettigrew laughed cruelly. "You could have handled Remembralls every day for a hundred years and never detected my alterations. After that, I just counted on your natural vindictiveness! Heh! You should have seen the look on Sirius's face when he realized what I'd done!"

Peter shook his head as if recalling a fond memory while James and Remus looked on in shock.

"And then," Harry interrupted, "after you helped send Sirius to Azkaban, you kept on manipulating James. Getting him to finance your Law Mastery. To make you Jim's new godfather. To make you Seneschal and Proxy for House Potter."

"Quite so, Harry. It was easy. Your father's very gullible, after all. And by that point, I was the only friend he had left to stand beside him after Sirius's '*shocking betrayal*.'"

James ground his teeth at the succession of insults. Then, something Pettigrew said earlier finally registered.



"*Pet ... project.* Sirius said that on the day we went to your father's vault." James's eyes narrowed. "Do you mean to say that you joined Voldemort because you overheard Sirius say some things that hurt your feelings?"

Peter snorted. "Sirius could never hurt my feelings by that point. We only kept up the pretense of friendship for your benefit. But I never forgave him for the Prank. And he never forgave me for the temerity of *not forgiving him* even after you and Remus asked me to. No, James, the last straw wasn't hearing what Sirius really thought about me. It was hearing *you* refuse to stick up for me in the slightest. On the day when I'd had one terrible shock after another, I heard James Potter – who I had to beg to come with me to Gringotts – admit that I was nothing but a charity case. And so, I decided if I couldn't have your genuine friendship ... then *I would take everything else from you.*"

"No! That's insane!" Remus sputtered. "You were *a good person*. I know you weren't faking that during all the years of our friendship. I cannot believe that you would abandon the Marauders and turn evil over something like that."

"But you see, Remus, *that's the thing!*" Pettigrew said excitedly. "That's what I learned that day in Gringotts. *That there is no good! There is no evil!* There is only ...."

"Power," Harry interrupted in a bored tone. "Power and those too weak to seek it."

Peter's eyes rose in surprise. "You're familiar with that saying?"

"Yeah, it's the motto of Emeric the Evil. Voldemort himself quoted it to me when I was a First Year, just a few minutes before your godson set him on fire. And I'll ask you what I

asked your Lord: Did you know that those were among Emeric's last words just before his execution?"

Peter's face darkened almost angrily. But then, the anger passed, and he suddenly grinned infectiously. "Why yes, Harry, I did indeed know that!"

Then, he tilted his head and pointed a finger at the boy. "And since we're trading trivia questions about the greatest Dark Lord in history – did *you* know that Emeric the Evil ... *had a daughter?*"

Harry blinked several times in confusion. "...what?"

Peter began to pace around the room as if delivering a lecture.

"While Emeric Belasco was being frog-marched through the Veil of Death by people who weren't fit to polish his wand – literally or figuratively – Lucretia Belasco was fleeing the country with as much gold and as many of her father's dark objects and grimoires as she could fit into an expanding bag. She made her way to Bavaria under a false identity and married her way into a prominent wizarding family by the name of Kleinwuchs."

He looked around expectantly. "Anybody recognize *that* name from Binns's boring lectures?"

Harry was clueless, but James thought the name sounded familiar. Remus, however, looked up at Pettigrew in horror. "Peter ... *no* ... it can't be!"

"Oh, I'm afraid it can, Remus. Under Lucretia's guidance and that of her carefully educated descendants, the Kleinwuchs family grew from minor Germanic nobility to one of the preeminent Houses in Europe ... and one of the

darkest. Their power and influence lasted for centuries until the House was wiped out during the Grindelwald War. The last survivor was a dark wizard by the name of Gustav Kleinwuchs ... who was also my grandfather!"

He turned to James. "Oh come on, Prongs! Surely you remember *that* name, being the bootlicking Dumbledore worshiper that you are!"

James paled. "Your ... your grandfather was *Gustav Kleinwuchs*?!"

Harry looked around at the adults in the room in confusion. "I'm guessing I should be impressed with that name?"

Remus spoke haltingly. "Harry ... Gustav Kleinwuchs was Grindelwald's highest-ranking lieutenant. He was also known as the Butcher of Silesia and the Death Wolf among other appellations because of his *crimes against humanity and against Magic itself*. Among other atrocities, he killed thousands of wizards and Muggles alike in the course of his experiments in weaponizing lycanthropy!"

"But Gustav Kleinwuchs died in the bombing of Dresden!" James said.

"Nope," Peter replied. "Most of the Kleinwuchs family died in that attack, but Gustav and his youngest son survived. Gustav had truly only served Grindelwald because he believed Grindelwald possessed the Elder Wand that had once been wielded by Emeric until his fall. He'd planned to betray Grindelwald and reclaim the family's greatest treasure when the time was right, but Dumbledore defeated Grindelwald before he had the chance. By that point, the Allied victory seemed inevitable, so he defected instead."

"Defected," Harry said slowly. "Defected to who?"

"Defected to *whom*, Harry," Pettigrew said smugly. "And who do you think would help a wanted war criminal emigrate to Britain and set him and his son up with fake identities and new faces? *The Unspeakables*, of course. They were willing to overlook his ... indiscretions in exchange for all of his research notes from his work during the War."

Peter turned to Lupin. "I doubt Damocles Belby ever knew it, but the basis for that potion that you've been taking all these months was borne of my grandfather's work in the werewolf detention camps in Poland. In exchange for all that occult lore, the Unspeakables smuggled my grandfather and father into Britain and set them up with new identities: the Pettigrews, George and Martin, refugees from the evil Grindelwald's campaign of destruction. And to help them integrate into British wizarding society – and, I suppose, make sure my Grandfather didn't get any *ideas* they found objectionable – they assigned a young, newly-initiated Unspeakable by the name of Augustus Rookwood to be their handler."

Pettigrew barked out another laugh. "I'm told it took Grandfather less than two months to win Rookwood's loyalty away from the Unspeakables." He smirked at James. "And to think, I never knew *any of this* until the day I first entered my family vault and then finally accepted that my friends Prongs and Padfoot were *irredeemable pricks!*"

Then, he turned to Harry.

"Oh, and speaking of my beloved mentor – would you mind telling me where Augustus Rookwood is now, Harry?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Harry answered calmly.

"And if I were to say here in front of your father that I *know* you're somehow a part of the conspiracy that broke him and the other Death Eaters out of Azkaban? That I *know* that Sirius is on his way to Hogwarts *right now* at your invitation? To hide in the *Chamber of Secrets* no less?"

James turned towards Harry in shock, but the boy ignored him.

"Sorry. I still have no idea what you're talking about."

"Of course not," Peter said. "You couldn't tell me even if you wanted to, not even under torture, because of some mighty well-crafted oaths you're under. I learned that much from the twenty minutes or so I got to play around with Mr. Flint. Not even a few Crucios were enough to make him break his oaths. But it doesn't matter. I know Sirius is on his way, and Fenrir Greyback will be waiting in the Forbidden Forest to greet him. An *intelligent and fully sentient* Fenrir Greyback!"

"*You gave my potion ... to Fenrir Greyback?*" Remus sputtered angrily.

"Well, of course! I mean, I have the formula right here!" Pettigrew patted his coat pocket warmly. "But I could hardly give up the chance to field test the thing."

He laughed again. "Intelligent werewolves. The Holy Grail of Emeric Belasco. All mine." He looked around the room. "I just want to thank you all. This may be the happiest day of my life! Ha! I may even learn to summon a Patronus of my own after this!"

"Why are you even telling us all this?" Harry asked in exasperation, as if offended by the cliché of a villain revealing all his secrets so readily.

"A good question! Why am I ranting and monologuing like a villain from some Muggle radio drama? Well, for one thing, I have been eating hippogriff dung sandwiches for pretty much the last twenty-two years that I've been hanging around your father, and frankly, I'm delighted to finally tell him *exactly* what I think of him. And also, I may be a dark wizard, but I *am* a Gryffindor. It's just not in my nature to resist the chance to gloat."

He pulled out his pocket watch again to check the time. "But *mostly*, it's because my watch appears to be running several minutes fast. I'd have thought that Remus would start to change already, but apparently not, so I've got time to kill."

With that last remark, Harry looked over to the horrified Remus Lupin who was beginning to sweat profusely.

"Peter, *please*! Don't do this! After all these years, *don't make me a killer!*"

"Ah, Remus. I'm doing this precisely because of how much I value our friendship. I know how much you've struggled pointlessly all these years. And it's *so unnecessary*! Once you finally *give in and taste manflesh*, you'll see. You'll finally be what you were *meant to be*! Emeric the Evil's greatest work. A flawless instrument of death!"

"You won't do it!" James said angrily even as he continued pulling ineffectually at the ropes. "Just stop this nonsense, Peter. Even if you betrayed me and my family to Voldemort, I *know* you. The real you. And I know you won't kill us! You don't have it in you to be a cold-blooded...!"

**"AVADA KEDAVRA!"**

There was a flash of green, and Marcus Flint fell to the floor lifeless.

"NOOO!" Harry screamed, while James and Remus just looked on in shock and horror.

"Still want to finish that sentence, James?" Peter sneered. "You have no idea what I've done. You have no idea what I'm capable of. You have no idea what I'll do next. But I'm happy to provide a synopsis. In a few minutes, Remus will transform and, at my direction, he will kill you and your Heir before disappearing into the Forest. An investigation will reveal that he never received his potion because Severus Snape had a tragic accident in his lab a few hours ago and died from inhalation of toxic fumes. Specifically, an aconite-based poison, which is really funny if you know about his history as a Death Eater.

"I will explain to the authorities and to Jim that you, James, had a plan to lure Sirius Black here to the Shrieking Shack using the Marauders' Map which I gave to you after receiving it from Remus. Only you didn't know that Remus was still using the Shack for his monthly transformations due to the Fidelius he was under. Nor did you know that young Harry here had been charged by Albus Dumbledore with figuring out Remus's Secret and his research in that area led him to follow you here to the Shrieking Shack. *But* please don't worry too much about poor grief-stricken Jim. As his godfather, I'll file the formal adoption paperwork in just a few days and also start the process of becoming the Potter House Regent."

"Lily will never let that happen," James said through gritted teeth. Peter sneered at him contemptuously.

"She won't have a choice, James, seeing as how '*the Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter*' signed all the paperwork *months ago* to give me Regency over Jim and the House itself in the event of his death! Even if Lily contests your designation, there's no way the Wizengamot would rule in her favor given her outspoken blood status and the sheer number of influential Purebloods that she's been consistently pissing off since she was eleven years old!"

Potter stared at his Seneschal and Proxy with his mouth open, speechless at the sudden realization of how thoroughly he'd been betrayed.

"As for Lily herself, I'm still trying to decide how best to handle her if she causes problems. I don't want to traumatize Jim any more than necessary by killing *both* his parents. So, I'm thinking instead a mental breakdown of some kind that gets her institutionalized in St. Mungo's for the rest of her life. Something comparable to the Longbottoms, maybe. That shouldn't be too hard to arrange."

"YOU STAY AWAY FROM MY WIFE, YOU SON OF A BITCH!" James bellowed impotently.

Peter ignored the outburst and turned to Harry. "Well, Harry? That's my plan. Can I have a Slytherin critique of my cunning and style?"

"Sure," Harry said coldly. "It's ridiculous and overcomplicated and has at least a dozen failure points where everything could fall apart. Also, just so you know - I'm going to kill you for what you did to Marcus!"

Peter chuckled. "Well, you'd better get cracking on that because you've only got a few minutes left."



Pettigrew rose and strolled over to where Remus was struggling with his own bonds. Along the way, he slashed his palm open with his wand, and blood began to drip to the floor.

"NO, PETER!" he yelled through his sobs. "I WON'T DO IT! WHATEVER IT TAKES, I WON'T HURT ANYONE!"

"Shhh, Remus! I'm afraid I won't be leaving you a choice, my old friend."

He knelt down and wiped his hand over Remus's face, smearing his blood all over it. Instantly, Remus seemed to go into a violent fit.

"STOP IT!" A distraught James yelled. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO HIM?!"

Peter stood and stepped back as the frenzied Remus Lupin opened his eyes. They glowed amber. Suddenly, there was a loud crack as several of Lupin's bones spontaneously cracked with the start of his lunar transformation.

"I am the last of the Line of Emeric Belasco, James," Peter said with solemn pride. "The Father of All Werewolves. Emeric's blood flows through my veins. And the Beast inside every werewolf will *always* recognize its master."

And then, Remus Lupin threw back his head and howled in mindless rage as his muscles started to bulge and his jaw cracked and distended into a muzzle full of long, sharp teeth. Peter turned back to the two Potters and grinned as if he were the proud owner of a pet that was performing some difficult trick. Then, he reached into his pocket and pulled out two wands.

"I know the sensible thing to do is to snap these, but it might lead to questions when they find your remains. Besides, what kind of Gryffindor would I be if I didn't leave you a sporting chance!"

He turned and threw first one wand and then the other as far as he could into the next room.

"Now I know for a fact that James is pants at wandless magic, Harry, but I'm told you managed an impressive feat of accidental magic in summoning your wand from a few feet away last Halloween. Let's see if you can do it again from quite a bit farther away *before Remus eats your face off!*"

He turned back to Lupin, whose transformation was nearly complete.

"REMUS!" Pettigrew snapped in a commanding voice as if giving orders to a well-trained hound. The werewolf's head snapped towards Pettigrew in response, though he never stopped snarling like a rabid dog.

"When I've gone, tear them both to shreds. Then, mutilate Flint's body so it doesn't look like a Killing Curse. After they're dead, come find me in the Forest."

The werewolf growled and turned towards James and Harry. Saliva dripped down from its bared fangs.

Pettigrew turned towards James one last time. "Okay, I guess I'm off to kill Sirius Black and then seize control of House Potter while building a werewolf army under my personal control! Exciting times! But don't you worry, Prongs. I promise – *I will love Jim like he was my own flesh and blood!*"

Then, he paused as if he'd suddenly remembered something important.

"Oh, I almost forgot. *HAPPY BIRTHDAY!*" He gave the friend he'd betrayed a toothy grin and a little finger-wiggling wave. James recognized the wave - it was the same wave he'd given James all those years ago in front of the Pettigrew family vault. The day James had unwittingly set Peter on the path to this moment. Then, there was a loud crack as Pettigrew Apparated away. In response, the werewolf threw off the last of the rags that had been Remus Lupin's clothes and HOWLED!

And then, the Beast charged towards its prey.

## Chapter End Notes

Next: Even Worse!

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P\*\*\*\*\*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2 (What the Sinister Man is reading):

(1) "Crime and Punishment" by mloctlis, which I already recommended last chapter, but I misspelled the author's name so here it is again.

(2) "Too Far From Home" by story2tell. This is not normally an HP genre I enjoy, but it has some interesting features that intrigue me. It's one of those

"Harry is summoned to an AU where James and Lily are still alive" fics, but instead of post-Final Battle Harry getting kidnapped by people desperate for a savior, Harry is sent to this other world soon after Little Hangleton while he's deep in PTSD, the travel is not intentional on anyone's part, and there is eventually travel back and forth between the two worlds by multiple individuals which leads to some surprising twists. Also, except for AU Dumbledore, there's very little bashing, and even alt-Dumbledore is just more cold and ruthless than in canon rather than gratuitously evil. Warning: Rather angsty.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors:

3rtrgfed, ACI100, Adam Sitrich, aeegoem, FeatheryMinx, HeidiWolf, Jay, Krisni, Miss Andris, Mr. Gift, Pokeflute, ProfessionalDragonslayer, and ProgKingHughesker. Thanks guys!

AN4: Just in case it's not clear, the little wave that Peter gave here and in the Gringotts scene from Chapter 120 is supposed to evoke the "goodbye wave" Peter gives in the film version of Prisoner of Azkaban. It was the only genuinely creepy thing canon-Peter ever did.

# **The Hunting of Sirius Black (The Dementors)**

## Chapter Notes

### SHAMELESS PLUG!

My first original novel, *Strangers In Boston*, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

## ***Chapter 40: The Hunting of Sirius Black (The Dementors)***

### ***The Forbidden Forest***

***6:48 p.m.***

Fenrir Greyback stood nude in a clearing with his clothes and wand nestled under a nearby tree. He looked up through the opening in the forest canopy. High above, he could see Dementors floating almost peacefully in a way that belied their horrific nature. And much higher, far above the Dementors, he could see *the Moon*. Silvery light bathed the werewolf as he waited for his transformation. He wondered if the Change would still be agonizingly

painful while he was under the effects of the Wolfsbane Potion.

It was.

Abruptly, Greyback *screamed in agony*. In some ways, it was worse than normal. Usually, his awareness receded immediately into the deep recesses of his mind, leaving the Beast to suffer the physical effects of the Change, but the potion apparently made that impossible. It felt as though his skin was on fire from the sensation of rough coarse animal hair growing speedily out of every follicle. Every single bone in his body broke at once and was instantly mended into a new shape. His ears rang painfully as his hearing improved exponentially, instantly overwhelming him with new sensations.

He fell to the ground, still screaming, and rolled around for several minutes before finally coming to rest. Then, he lay there for a moment, gasping in pain until finally, he opened his eyes to see the Moon still overhead. Slowly, he rose from the ground and looked around in wonder. Carefully, so as not to claw himself, he ran his hands over his body. He'd known that he was powerful and fearsome, but only by reputation, by what *others* said about him in news reports and interviews with the few survivors he'd left behind.

But now, Greyback could *feel* the power of this form. The bulging muscles. The heightened senses. The lightning reflexes. He felt like a god made flesh. A stuttering growl emanated deep from his chest, growing louder until he realized that he was not growling at all. He was laughing. He threw his head back in delight and howled his delirious joy to the forest. When the laughter finally died away, he sniffed the air experimentally before looking around to get his bearings.

"*Kill 'em*," he growled deeply with a throat not made for human speech. "*Kill 'em all. But leave d'head fer Peter! Heh-heh-heh!*"

The werewolf dropped to all fours and bounded off into the night.

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### ***Meanwhile, in the Shrieking Shack...***

His transformation nearly complete, the thing that had been Remus Lupin howled madly in rage and hunger. Nearby, James struggled desperately to free himself from his bonds, but they were too tight. And with anti-Animagus cuffs on, he didn't know if the transformed Remus would ignore him as a werewolf would a normal Animagus or if the beast would tear him apart ... or indeed, whether Pettigrew's control over his friend would overcome that protection regardless.

Beside him, Harry sprang into action the second Pettigrew Apparated out of the Shack. With a loud grunt, he rolled over onto his stomach and then wriggled his fingers. To James's amazement, Harry's wand flew like a rocket from the next room where Peter had hurled it and snapped into the boy's waiting hand.

"***FINITE INCANTATEM!***" he yelled, and with a flash, his bonds disappeared. Then, he rolled back over and pointed his wand toward Remus who was racing straight for him and was less than five feet away. Instantly, Harry dilated and tried to figure out what he could possibly do in the seconds before the werewolf ripped him apart.

***Thump-thump.***

The werewolf's movements slowed, but not nearly as much as Harry had hoped. He had at most two more heartbeats, maybe three, in which to think of a spell that might work to repel the beast. Or more accurately, *another* spell. Because he already knew one spell that would work because it had been designed for just this situation, but his mind *recoiled* from using it. He knew and liked this man. Remus Lupin was a *victim*, just as he and James were. And Harry desperately did not want to harm him, let alone ....

***Thump-thump.***

Despite the Slytherin's desperation, no other options presented themselves. If he did not act now, he would die. And then James would die. And then, the werewolf would join Pettigrew and Greyback in the Forbidden Forest and Merlin only knew how many more would die, though several of his closest friends would certainly be among the casualties.

***Thump-thump.***

Time was up. Remus's claws were less than a yard from his face, and the only options were to act or die. The boy released his dilation ... and *hissed*.

***"SSSECTUMSSSEMPRA!"***

Harry's wand vibrated in his hand from the force of the magic unleashed, as waves of magical force that cut like buzz saws slammed into the werewolf's body, picking it up and flinging it across the room ... and *slicing it into several pieces* in the process.

The physical remains of Remus Lupin slammed into the opposite wall and then dropped to the ground, leaving a bloody smear in their wake. The individual pieces twitched



for a few seconds and then went still. The largest portion, consisting of his upper torso and head, was the last to do so, and the werewolf's head let out a shuddering death rattle as life fled from it.

Harry slowly lowered his wand and then closed his eyes, letting out a shaky breath as he tried to center himself. Under the circumstances, he *really* did not have time to waste on vomiting, let alone having a stress-related breakdown. Next to him, a still-bound James Potter stared at the remains of his former friend in shock and horror.

"What did you do, Harry?" he whispered. "*What did you do?*"

"I saved both our lives," Harry answered dully as he climbed up from the floor. "The only way I could."

"You ... you killed him!"

"It was him or us. What else should I have done?"

The elder Potter's eyes blazed, and he looked at his son with a sudden contempt. "And you're a *Parselmouth* too! All this time! And you *let me* treat Jim ...!"

"How!" Harry spat angrily. "How did you treat Jim, the son you actually *loved* all these years, once you found out *he* was a Parselmouth?! And how would you have treated *me* if you'd known I was one too?! You accused me of being a dark wizard when I was *eleven* the day after my Sorting! Can you *blame me* for concealing it?"

"You *are* a dark wizard! A spell like that *must* be dark magic! You complain about how I treated you when you were eleven? *You've murdered a man before reaching fourteen!*"

"I very much doubt the Wizengamot would call it murder to kill someone in self-defense, even if it wasn't *a transformed werewolf*."

"We'll see," James said coldly.

Harry shook his head in disgust. "I don't have time for this. **STUPEFY!**"

There was a flash of red light, and James Potter fell unconscious once more. Harry stared at the man for a moment and then turned away. On his way out, he paused and knelt by Marcus Flint's body. The boy's eyes were still open and staring up sightlessly. Gently, Harry reached down and closed them.

"I'm sorry, Marcus. I'm ... sorry."

Then, Harry rose and searched for the entrance to the tunnel that led to the Whomping Willow. The whole time, he focused on shoving his emotions down. He would grieve later. And perhaps rage later, if James Potter provoked him again. But now, he simply didn't have the time.

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***The Statue of Gregory the Smarmy***  
***The First Floor Corridor***  
***7:10 p.m.***

When Harry arrived at the statue concealing the hidden tunnel, Theo and Neville were waiting for him, though they were standing a good ten feet apart, and Neville looked as though there was some foul stench in the air he was forced to tolerate. Without speaking to either boy, Harry activated the secret latch and entered the passage. Despite their animosity, Neville and Theo looked at one another in

surprise before following. Once all three were inside, the door slid closed again.

"Aren't we waiting for Marcus and Professor Snape?" Neville asked.

"No," Harry said tersely before turning to Theo. "I need you to send a Patronus message to Scrimgeour. Tell him that Snape is locked in his private potions lab and is in danger. Be careful of poisonous fumes."

Theo's eyes widened, and then he pulled out his wand. Harry turned back to Neville.

"And I need you to send a Patronus to Regulus Black. Tell him ... tell him that Pettigrew knows they're coming and is waiting somewhere in the Forest ... along with Fenrir Greyback. And Greyback is in full control of his mind even while transformed into a werewolf."

"What?!" Neville exclaimed. "How?!" Beside him, Theo was equally horrified.

"JUST SEND THE DAMNED MESSAGES!" Harry yelled before adding in a softer voice. "Please."

His two friends stared at him for a few seconds. Neither could remember the last time they'd ever heard Harry Potter yell in anger. They both summoned Patronuses, and Harry took the opportunity to calm himself, and the feeling of serenity generated by the presence of the two ethereal creatures helped greatly. Then, the rabbit and the bear disappeared on their respective missions.

"So obviously *Snape* isn't joining us?" Theo said. "Where's Marcus?"

Harry looked at the floor. "He's dead, Theo. Peter Pettigrew murdered him in front of me."

The other two boys were shocked at the revelation. Neville gasped and put his hand over his mouth. Despite their different Houses, he'd become quite fond of the older Slytherin.

"Harry ..." Theo finally said softly. "We ... we can't do this alone. Pettigrew *and* Greyback? Along with all those Dementors? We need help!"

"Who, Theo?" Harry spat. "Snape is probably dead. Scrimgeour has a lame leg and can't cast a Patronus. Dumbledore is gone. No one else has any idea about what's going on, and by the time we could persuade someone, even if we could get someone to *believe* us, it would be too late!"

"Harry, calm down," Neville said cautiously.

"I don't have *time* to calm down! The only two living adults who've ever given a damn about me are both in danger and don't even know it! So, I'm going to save them. And if I get the chance, I'm going to put Peter Pettigrew in his grave while I do it! Now if you'd rather go get a professor instead, be my guest. Maybe my mist Patronus will be enough. But right now, I'm going!"

And with that, he turned and fled down the long tunnel that led to the Forbidden Forest. Theo followed instantly. Neville turned and looked longingly at the door leading back to the castle and safety before sighing loudly and running after the two Slytherins.

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***Meanwhile, at the northernmost edge of the Forbidden Forest...***

Sirius and Regulus listened with horror to the report delivered by the glowing silver bear that spoke in the voice of Neville Longbottom before dissipating.

"Okay," Regulus said slowly. "The most dangerous werewolf in Europe, who has been tracking us for a full day across Britain, is now a hundred times *more* dangerous. And Peter Pettigrew, who has a magical map that can track you unerringly, is with him. Any more good news?"

"You left out the hundred Dementors floating overhead," Sirius added in a tired voice. Both men were utterly exhausted from having been on a constant run since the night before with no chance for rest, let alone sleep.

"Oh yes, of course! Can't forget the Dementors! By the way, how likely are they to be able to sense your presence?"

Sirius looked up. He could see the foul things distantly above through the canopy. "... not very, I hope. I don't know for sure. They can't *see* anything. They perceive through some sort of magical aura detection. And they can't detect me as Padfoot."

"No, but I'll wager Greyback can through your scent, and Pettigrew, of course, knows what you look like as a dog."

Sirius said nothing, but he grimaced at the mention of his former friend. Regulus took a deep breath and shook his head violently. There was a blurring of his features, but then, to Sirius's surprise, he was suddenly looking at his own twin.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

"Trying to apply a little Slytherin cunning. You stay in dog-form, and I'll stay in *your* form. We stick together, but if Greyback shows up, you take off towards the secret passage as fast as you can, while I lead the werewolf away."

"Regulus ...!"

"No, Sirius, just *think*. If I look like you, they'll expect me to still be weak from Azkaban and underestimate me. *Plus*, I can Apparate away if need be. Now change forms so we can get on with it!"

Reluctantly, Sirius shifted to his dog-form while Regulus transfigured his own clothing to resemble what Sirius had been wearing. He also left the two borrowed brooms they'd been riding beside a tree as neither of the older model brooms could possibly have stood up to navigating through the darkened Forest. Then, the two brothers cautiously entered the woods.

After almost an hour of fighting off Acromantulas and other denizens of the Forest while trying to maintain stealth, they were drawing close to the hidden stump entrance. But then, Padfoot froze and began to growl softly but intently, his ears folding down against his skull. Regulus closed his eyes and *listened* ... before hurling himself to the ground just as a Killing Curse flew through the space where his head had been.

Simultaneously, there was a crash of foliage from the opposite side followed by Fenrir Greyback, in all his terrible lupine glory, exploding onto the scene. Reacting quickly, Regulus targeted the werewolf while it was in mid-leap.

"***DEPULSO!***"

There was a flash of light, and Greyback was hurled away, crashing through trees as he flew. To Regulus's amazement, the werewolf bellowed a loud expletive in a guttural inhuman voice, thus proving that he still had human intellect. The werewolf landed some fifty feet away, giving Reg time to move, and he scrambled to his feet and fired off a Killing Curse of his own that narrowly missed Greyback. The werewolf crouched and then leaped, not towards Regulus but off to the side into the forest where he disappeared completely. Reg cursed. As the former Auror had feared, a werewolf in control of its senses would be even more dangerous than normal, with human cunning added to the beast's other advantages. Regulus ran into the forest as well before Pettigrew could target him with another Killing Curse.

Meanwhile, in the nearby woods, Sirius carefully stalked his way towards his own prey. He'd found Peter in the woods by scent. Unsurprisingly, the rat-Animagus was hiding like a coward, waiting for another chance to snipe Regulus with a curse. Sirius was almost close enough to strike when he noticed that Peter had his wand in one hand and a parchment in the other. And he was smiling. Before Sirius could react, Peter whirled around and pointed the wand in his general direction.

**"CONFRINGO!"**

Sirius leaped away as best he could, but he was still caught in range of the Blasting Curse. The force of the explosion picked up the canine and slammed him against a nearby tree.

"Silly puppy!" Peter laughed. "You can't sneak up on me while I've got the Map, Sirius! No matter what tricks you and that brother of yours play!"

But just as Peter made that snide boast, the very Map in question jerked out of his hand and flew off into the woods ... where it was casually caught by Harry Potter with his offhand.

"I'll thank you to keep your grubby hands off my stuff, *Wormtail!*"

Pettigrew sneered. "You should have struck from behind while you had the chance, brat! **LACERO!**"

The Cutting Curse flew towards Harry only for him to casually bat it aside into a nearby tree.

"Unlike you, I don't *need* to strike my enemies from behind like a coward. **STUPEFY!**"

The surprised Peter narrowly dodged Harry's counterattack, which gave the boy time to move closer. To Peter's annoyance, he now could not simply blast the boy with a Blasting Curse or some other area of attack spell, and the boy was too nimble to hit otherwise. Worse, as Peter quickly realized, Harry was *very* good at dueling!

---

Nearby, Regulus (still wearing Sirius's face) cautiously made his way through the forest listening in vain for any sign of Greyback. Then, there was a rustling in some nearby brush, and in a flash, Regulus fired off an Expulso in that direction. There was a loud explosion, over which Regulus could hear a scream of pain. To his horror, it was not the voice of Fenrir Greyback but of someone much younger. Regulus ran forward and gasped at the sight of Neville Longbottom laying on the ground, unconscious or perhaps worse.



Then, it was Regulus's turn to scream as the werewolf he'd been pursuing dropped down behind him from out of a nearby tree and raked its claws down the wizard's back. Reg fell forward in agony, his wand slipping from his hand as he hit the ground.

"*Gotcha, Black!*" Fenrir said in a guttural inhuman rasp.  
"*Time t' die!*"

But before the werewolf could advance, he staggered back in shock and pain as something struck him in the face, singeing the fur on his muzzle. Greyback shook his head to clear it and then blinked stupidly in confusion. For before his eyes, there suddenly appeared a surprisingly fierce-looking silver rabbit floating in mid-air, one whose master had named it "Fiver." And for such a cute little animal, Fiver looked rather angry with him.

Before the werewolf could react, the rabbit Patronus shot forward and kicked him in the head again with its hindlegs. The werewolf staggered back again. And again. And again. Nearby, from out of the woods stepped Theo No-Name with his wand focused on his Patronus and his brow drenched in sweat from the force of his exertion. The young Slytherin had never tested how long he could maintain a Patronus, but he knew he was near his limit.

All told, Fiver got another three solid kicks on the werewolf before it finally dissipated as Theo dropped to his knees in exhaustion. Fenrir shook his head angrily and then focused his attention on the brat who'd dared to attack him with a *prey animal*, perhaps the worst insult that could be levied against a werewolf. Fenrir threw back his head and howled before running towards Theo. Luckily for the boy, though, his Patronus had lasted long enough.

**"*AVADA KEDAVRA!*"**

So intent was Fenrir on slaying the boy that he'd forgotten about Regulus completely, and while heavily wounded, the wizard was able to crawl to his wand and then target the werewolf. The green light hit Fenrir in the side, and he dropped to the ground stone dead.

Theo ran forward and knelt by Regulus's side, though as far as Theo knew, it was Sirius instead.

"Hello, you must be Sirius Black," Theo said shakily. "I'm Theo, Harry's friend."

"I know who you are, Theo," Regulus said weakly. "And I congratulate you on that magnificent Patronus. I wish now I'd put you on Team Protector with Harry. You were wasted in P.E."

Then, he coughed up blood.

Theo was confused by the man's words. "I ... I'm sorry. I don't understand."

"Never mind, Theo. Go help Harry. He'll explain. Quickly now."

"But you're hurt! I know some basic healing spells ...!"

"I'll be fine," the wizard said. "Harry needs you! Go!"

With a frown, Theo headed off into the woods in the direction from which he could still hear spellfire. Once he was gone, Regulus closed his eyes and carefully placed the tip of his wand over his heart. And then, he began to whisper an old family incantation.

---

Elsewhere, deeper in the Forest, Peter was reduced to defensive retreat against Harry Potter's fury. The few curses the Death Eater managed to fire were easily parried by Harry's Avertio shield. Meanwhile, Peter himself was not a trained duelist and relied exclusively on a shaky Protego and frantic dodging to avoid Harry's increasingly dangerous curses. The outcome would not have been in doubt save for a stroke of ill fortune – as Harry was pressing his attack with a flurry of Burning and Cutting Curses, he failed to notice an Acromantula hiding in a nearby tree until it leaped down for an attack. The boy managed to dive out of the way while blasting the spider with an Incendio that caused it to chitter madly in the last seconds of its life, but it meant taking his attention off his opponent.

***"EXPELLIARMUS!"***

A blast of light hit the boy, and his wand went flying even as he fell backwards to the ground. Peter advanced while bearing a sick grin, though for once, he was not in the mood for gloating. He pointed his own wand at the boy from near point-blank range.

***"AVADA KED-AAARRGH!"***

Before he could complete the Killing Curse, Peter was interrupted by the pain of a massive black dog that leaped at him from the underbrush and bit down on his wand hand hard enough to crack bones. Instantly, Harry stretched out a hand to summon his own wand back.

***"EXPELLIARMUS!"***

This time, it was Pettigrew's wand that went flying ... as well as the man himself. In his anger and excitement, Harry had put perhaps a bit too much power into the Disarming

Jinx. Peter flew back almost twenty feet, screaming in pain the whole way as his hand was violently (and bloodily) wrenched free from the dog's mighty jaws. The Grim snarled and spat out a single bloody finger before turning towards Pettigrew and preparing to pounce. With a yelp of terror, Pettigrew transformed into his rat form and scampered into a patch of thick spiny nettles before Sirius could run him down.

The dog turned back into a man who promptly incinerated the bush with a spell. But before he could pursue, he heard a voice calling out for him.

"Harry!" Theo yelled. "Come quick! Mr. Black is hurt!"

Sirius took one last look in the direction the rat had run before cursing loudly.

"It's okay, Sirius," Harry said while holding up the wand he'd claimed from the Death Eater. "He's wounded and disarmed. He can't cast spells or Apparate. We can chase him down after we see to Regulus."

Sirius nodded sullenly before heading towards Theo (who was suitably confused by the presence of a *second* Sirius Black). Harry paused to extinguish the burning shrubbery, as he had no wish to be caught in a Forbidden Forest that was *on fire*. Then, after a moment of consideration, he cast Serpensortia to summon four cobras that he sent in pursuit of Pettigrew.

Seconds later, Sirius, Harry, and Theo were back where Regulus lay, still in the form of his older brother. The still-warm body of Fenrir Greyback was nearby. Harry paused to look around.

"Where's Neville?" he asked urgently only to be answered by a groan from somewhere nearby.

"I'll find him," Theo said. "You should stay here with them."

Carefully, Sirius knelt by his brother who seemed to be resting peacefully. "Wake up, Regulus," he said gently. "We're not quite home yet."

Reg's eyes fluttered open. "Naturally," he drawled in a sleepy tone. "I finally get a few moments rest, and you have to come and interrupt it."

Sirius laughed. "Come on. Get up. I'll heal your wounds and then we'll get to safety."

"I don't think I'll be able to finish this journey with you, brother. I'm sorry."

"Nonsense! You're not dead yet, and you're no quitter."

Regulus chuckled. "I'm afraid you're wrong on both accounts. A few minutes ago, I cast the Euthanatos Curse on myself."

Sirius jerked back in shock. The Euthanatos Curse was from the Anathema Codex, but it was not truly an Anathema spell. Rather, it was a spell added to the Codex's marginalia by some ancient Lord of House Black. Also called the "Good Death" Curse, it ensured the death of the target within just a few minutes of casting but also that the death would be completely peaceful and pain-free. Perhaps the *kindest* Curse ever invented (and certainly to ever be invented by the notoriously cruel House Black), it was designed to ease the passage of those who were mortally wounded by dark magic and who would otherwise suffer a lingering and miserable demise.

"Why?!" Sirius shouted. "Why would you do that?!"

"Sirius, my back is broken, and by the claws of a werewolf which no magic can heal. I can't feel or move my legs. Assuming I live at all, the *best-case scenario* would be that I suffer in debilitating pain in a wheelchair for the rest of my life. The *worst-case scenario* would be that my injuries miraculously heal themselves ... which would mean that I have contracted lycanthropy. And I will *die* before I become like those things that murdered my family."

"Regulus," Sirius croaked out as tears poured down his cheeks.

"Sirius, *it's okay*. My wife and son are waiting for me. They always have been. Only now, I've atoned for my sins as best I can, and I've earned the right to see them again." He turned his head towards Harry.

"Does Pettigrew still have the Map?" he asked.

"No, I recovered it," the boy said, his voice breaking.

"Of course, you did, Harry. I'd have expected nothing less from my very best student. Sirius, when I die, my body should remain in this form. You can use it to let people think it was you who died. Then, lay low in the Chamber of Secrets until Rufus and the others are ready to prove your innocence."

"No," Sirius said flatly.

"Sirius...."

"I said no. I will not use your *corpse* for my own ends. You will die wearing your own face as befits a Son of House Black. Your Lord commands it."

Regulus gasped out a painful laugh. "As you insist, my Lord." He shook his head once more to resume his true visage. Then, he looked sadly from Sirius to Harry and back again.

"My little Leo would have turned ten this coming October. Did you know that, Sirius?" His brother shook his head silently. "In a few years, he'd have started to Hogwarts. I'd like to think he'd have been a Slytherin, but truth be told, he'd have likely had too much of his mother in him for that. So probably a Hufflepuff then. I could live with that."

He reached out to take Sirius's hand. "Promise me something, brother."

Sirius was openly weeping now. "Anything."

Regulus nodded towards Harry. "Be the father I never had the chance to be. The father your godson *deserves*."

"I will. I swear it."

The dying man closed his eyes. "Look after him, Harry. He'll need it. He's a ... Gryffindor... after ... all...."

And then Regulus Black breathed his last.

Instantly, Sirius broke down into wracking sobs and buried his head in his brother's chest. Harry wiped tears from his own eyes even as his Slytherin nature (and the voice of Alastor Moody) commanded him to remain vigilant. Softly and unobtrusively, he raised his wand and cast a *Homenum Revelio* that identified Theo and Neville as they stepped into the clearing but showed no other people (whether human or rat) within Harry's maximum range.

After a few minutes of silence, Sirius stood up.

"What now?" Neville asked. "Are ... are we just going to leave him here?"

"No," Sirius said simply as he raised his wand and pointed it towards the sky.

*"I, Sirius Orion Black, Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of Black, hereby testify before Magic itself. Be it known that Regulus Arcturus Black died a true Son of the House of Black. That he conducted himself to the last moment of his life with dignity and courage and with the highest values of wizardry. And that whatever his sins, his soul and heart were always pure. We Blacks are named for stars and planets and heavenly bodies because it is from star stuff that we are born. And it is to the stars that I commend Regulus Black: my kinsman, my brother, my blood."*

As he spoke, Regulus's body began to sparkle and shine until, at the conclusion of Lord Black's words, his entire body broke down into a cloud of twinkling lights that looked like tiny stars, enough to fill a galaxy. The stars rose from the forest floor and then ascended higher and higher until they disappeared in a brilliant flash of light.

---

Just a thousand yards away near a small lake, Pettigrew stumbled out of the brush while clutching his emergency holdout wand in his still-bleeding hand. He was still fuming over how everything had gone so wrong at the moment of his ultimate triumph. Harry Potter lived. And so, he assumed, did James (although the fact that an angry stag hadn't come charging at him put that question to doubt). He wasn't sure about the status of Remus or Fenrir, but the suspicious absence of any werewolf howls was not a good sign, nor were those unusually persistent - and obviously



non-indigenous! - snakes that he'd needed to fend off. *And fucking Sirius bit off his god-damned finger!*

Pausing to take stock, at least he still had the Wolfsbane Formula. If Fenrir was dead, it was a terrible blow, but Peter had other contacts in the European werewolf community. His greatest concern was James. If the Chief Auror still lived (or even if he was dead but Harry presented credible evidence to the authorities), Peter's life as an upstanding British wizard was over. And more importantly, his influence over Jim Potter was probably at an end. In the pale moonlight, he noticed *another* cobra slithering nearby, and he idly sliced it in two with a Lacero.

But then, he was distracted by a sudden flash of light originating in the forest behind him and shooting up into the sky. Whatever it was, it was probably bright enough to be seen from Hogwarts! Peter raised his spare wand. It was highly illegal and not a good match for him. (He wondered at times if the wand somehow held a grudge over how he'd murdered the prior owner to get it.) But it was good for Apparation and basic spells.

Like Sonorous.

---

"Right," said Sirius abruptly. "I'm off to kill Wormtail then."

Harry grabbed him by the arm. "Not unless I kill him first," the boy said coldly.

"Hey, hey!" Theo interrupted. "I thought the plan was to get Sirius to the Chamber of Secrets!"

"For once, I agree with him," Neville added, although it seemed to *offend* him to agree to anything Theo said.

"That plan is off the table," Harry said. "The Chamber's not safe. James knows that we were sending Sirius there, and Jim has the power to open it. Besides, I've got the Map back, so there's no way anyone can track Sirius with it. But we need to finish Peter Pettigrew off for good before he has a chance to bounce back and regroup!"

"Harry ...." Neville's intended lecture on Harry's sudden bloodthirstiness was cut short by the sound of a booming voice echoing through the forest. *Pettigrew's* booming voice, to be exact.

"HELLOOOO DEMENTORS! DID ANY OF YOU HAPPEN TO NOTICE THAT FLASH OF LIGHT THAT JUST SHOT BY! IF YOU GO TO WHERE IT ORIGINATED, YOU CAN FIND *SIRIUS BLACK*, THE ESCAPED PRISONER! FIND HIM AND KISS HIM!"

Harry and his companions looked up to the sky and saw to their dismay that the Dementors up above were indeed beginning to move towards them in response to Pettigrew's announcement.

"Yeah," Theo muttered. His breath was now visible in the sudden coldness that enveloped them. "I see what you meant about not giving him time to regroup!"

---

### ***Meanwhile in the Astronomy Tower ...***

After all these years, the Astronomy Tower was still Jim Potter's favorite place to sit and think when the life of the Boy-Who-Lived was getting to be a bit much ... like tonight. He'd heard nothing from his father or his Uncle Pete about this mysterious and incredibly vague plan to capture Sirius Black, but he noticed that Harry hadn't been at dinner, and that fact worried him.

Of course, *everything* about Harry worried him nowadays, but that was a consequence of the Imperius compulsion that someone had put on him. He'd written his father earlier in the week to see if there had been any more leads, but (as usual, lately) James had been evasive. Jim *hated* it when people kept secrets from him. Especially when it was secrets *about* him.

Suddenly, his attention was drawn towards the Forbidden Forest. It was some distance away from here, but he briefly noticed a strange light shoot up out of the woods and then disappear in a flash.

And then, to his amazement, he clearly heard his Uncle Pete's voice echo out of the woods. He couldn't make out everything, but he clearly heard "Dementors" and "Sirius Black." He jumped up and raced for the stairs. Whatever was going on, he was a Gryffindor and the Boy-Who-Lived. He couldn't just sit by and do nothing.

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### ***The Shrieking Shack***

***8:20 p.m.***

It had taken James Potter an hour to awaken from his traitorous Heir's Stunner, and then another twenty minutes to crawl (while still bound) to where his wand had landed. He cast a Finite on his bonds and then summoned his own Patronus to send a message to the ranking Senior Auror, Kingsley Shacklebolt. The message was as terse as it was shocking.

*"Prepare a Form 20315/HAF - Hogwarts Authorization to Pursue Homicide Investigation. Then meet me at the front gates of Hogwarts asap. Two murders have been committed."*

After sending the message, James took one last look around the crime scene. A boy cut down in his prime, one who James had come to respect despite his heritage and Slytherin nature. A friend he'd thought he'd lost forever but with whom he'd been reunited for mere moments before he was brutally cut down. Two victims of dark magic. Two dark wizards. One his closest friend, the other his Heir. James's heart ached at the thought of what he'd witnessed and what he would have to do next. But the words of the Prophecy could not be denied.

For the sake of the world, he had to *act*.

---

### ***Back in the Forest ...***

"*No, no, no, no*," Sirius muttered with increasing hysteria as he looked up wildly. But then, he gave a yelp of surprise as a blast of silvery mist from Harry's wand enveloped him with feelings of happiness and hope.

"Thanks," he said sheepishly.

"Switch to Padfoot," Harry said. "Then lead us out of the Forest as fast as you can."

Sirius nodded and transformed before taking off into the woods. The three boys followed and were soon joined by a silvery bear and rabbit. But the Patronus Charm was difficult, and neither Theo nor Neville could maintain it for long. After several minutes of running through the thick brush, Neville tripped and fell hard on his face. Theo turned back to help him but stopped at the sight of his angry expression.

"Go on!" the Gryffindor snarled. "I don't need help from *you*!"

Theo shook his head and ran off in pursuit of Harry and Padfoot while Neville hauled himself up and followed behind with a slight limp.

Moments later, Harry burst through thick foliage but then skidded to a stop. Padfoot was just a few feet ahead of him, frozen and whimpering in fear. They'd emerged on the shore of a small lake, and Harry knew if they could skirt around to the other side, they would be less than 300 yards from the edge of the Forest.

Floating above the lake were *scores* of Dementors.

Harry raised his wand shakily and summoned his mist Patronus, even as he struggled to ignore the biting cold and the onslaught of unhappy memories (and the sudden sense-memory of doxies crawling up his back). Seconds later, Theo emerged from the woods and summoned Fiver once more.

"Come on, Padfoot!" Harry urged. "We need another wand here!"

Sirius resumed his human form and pointed his wand up. "***EX—EXPECTO P-PATRONUM!***" The results were unimpressive, a soft glow from the tip of Sirius's wand. Unfortunately, his years in Azkaban had robbed the former Auror of the memories needed to summon a true Patronus. Still, the weak Patronuses of Sirius and Harry combined with Fiver were enough to ward off the nearest Dementors.

But then, Harry gasped in fear. While most of the Dementors were flying around in a seemingly random pattern, one Dementor remained perfectly stationary over the lake. And while its face was not visible beneath its ragged hood, Harry *knew* that it was staring at him. Somehow, Harry could tell that it was the same Dementor

that had attacked him on the train the previous September. The same one that marshaled the other Dementors against him when he was fleeing Fenrir Greyback on Halloween. The same one that tried to attack his brother at the November Quidditch match.

[I/We] kNoooW [your] FaAaAaAaCE [**DIE! DIE! DIE!**]

The words – no, not words, *primal concepts* – somehow burned their way into his mind despite his Occlumency. Perhaps it was because his own Legilimency skills had grown so much since he'd the last time he'd been this close to the rogue Dementor. But for whatever reason, the boy realized that *this Dementor* seemed to know him in a specific and personal way. It knew him and it hated him. But also, perhaps, *feared* him?

As if the Dementor somehow realized what Harry had intuited and took umbrage from it, the foul creature raised its arms and let out a deafening SCREEEECHH! In response to the rogue Dementor's command, *dozens* of its fellows *swarmed* towards Harry. At the last second, Theo positioned Fiver in front of his friend, and the Dementors diverted away. Then, instead of directly charging, the creatures began flying around the three wizards in a circle, constantly seeking an opening and preventing Theo from using Fiver to attack.

Harry's own vision was starting to blur by this point from his Patronus exertions, and then, he was almost knocked over when Sirius fell against him before dropping to the ground semi-conscious. To his left, Harry saw Theo physically shaking as he struggled to maintain Fiver's corporeality. And the whole time, one thought burned through his mind.

"Where the hell is Neville?!"

---

Unbeknownst to Harry, Neville Longbottom was very near. In fact, he was less than twenty feet away hidden among the dark foliage. With his right hand, he gripped his wand so tightly that his knuckles were bone white against the gold of the Longbottom Heir's ring. With his left hand, he absentmindedly rubbed his fingers over the ring as if to seek reassurance from it that he was doing the right thing. In the shadows of the forest, his eyes blazed with the intensity of the emotions he felt – emotions borne of the Ultimate Sanction that now bordered on madness.

He'd almost rushed into the clearing to join the others and add Elby to the fray, but a sudden and terrible inspiration stopped him. For *hours*, he'd been forced to travel alongside the Outcast, waiting for the betrayal that never came. It had been nerve-wracking. More than that, it had been *exasperating* that Harry Potter, who was so much cleverer than him, could not see what was obvious to Neville: that Theo No-Name was *evil*.

Sure, the Outcast had *acted* loyal and brave. Even now, he gave every appearance of protecting Harry and Sirius even at the risk of his own life. But Neville wasn't fooled. It was all part of the Outcast's plot to ... do *something*. But Neville had a plan of his own. Ironically, it was a plan to do ... *nothing*.

If he stayed here, hidden, and timed it *just right*, he could wait until Theo's Patronus failed, at which point the Dementors would swarm him. Then, Neville could summon his own Patronus and position Elby to protect Harry and Sirius but *not* the Outcast, leaving the cursed boy to be Kissed as he deserved. Harry would probably hate him

forever for it, but they would all be safe from the Outcast's evil.

It would be *easy*.

The Heir's ring seemed to grow warm against Neville's fingers as he contemplated what he was about to do. He hoped his father would approve. No, he *knew* his father would approve. This was his duty, after all. To the Wizengamot. To his family's honor. To the whole wizarding world. He was Longbottom of Longbottom, and today he would act as a Longbottom should.

*"You've always told me I'm expected to live up to my father's standards."*

Ahead of him, Harry finally collapsed on top of Sirius as if to shield him with his own body. Theo dropped to one knee but still maintained his Patronus which he redirected to cover Harry and Sirius at the cost of his own defense. A Dementor came in low from Theo's blindside and got close enough to grab the boy's arm. He screamed and dropped his wand, and Fiver disappeared instantly. The Dementor pulled the boy in close and began to raise its hood.

Neville's ring burned against his skin.

*"What would your father say to you if he were here now?"*

The Dementor leaned in slowly. Theo screamed.

*"Well, I would hope that he would say that he didn't want his Mum to become a murderess!"*

Neville hissed in pain as the ring drew blood. This was easy.

But it wasn't *right*!



---

Theo was rigid with terror as the Dementor leaned in to Kiss him. He could see under its hood now. It was faceless and repulsive, a putrid scab of grey mottled skin stretched over eye and nose sockets. The only recognizable feature was its mouth, a gaping hole that stretched wider as it moved towards Theo's face for the Kiss. The boy could hear the sound of a gasping death rattle as the air around them was sucked into that hideous maw. Then, his eyes rolled back in his head, and he could feel something deep inside him, something *vital*, coalesce in his mouth and then *slide out towards the Dementor*.

"*So this is what losing your soul feels like,*" Theo thought deliriously. "*Doesn't hurt as much as I'd thought.*"

That morbid thought was interrupted by a blinding white light that somehow filled the boy with renewed hope even as it drove the Dementor backwards with a furious screech and yanked Theo's semi-detached soul back into his body. The boy shook his head and then looked up to see Elby, somehow bigger and brighter than ever before, standing on its hind legs between him and the Dementor. The huge bear gave a deafening roar before slashing at the Dementor with a mighty claw. The foul creature squealed again and retreated.

Still on the ground, Theo felt around for his wand when he heard a voice behind him.

"Looking for this?"

It was Neville holding out Theo's wand and smiling at him for the first time since the Sanction began. He tossed Theo his wand and then held out a hand to help him up, one that

Theo gratefully accepted. And once Theo was standing, Neville swept him up in a bear hug.

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry for how *awful* I've been these months!"

"Don't worry about it!" Theo exclaimed. "But how did you break free from the Sanction? You must have ...."

But then, Theo was distracted by the sensation of something wet and sticky on his hand, the one Neville had grabbed to pull him up. It was blood. He looked over to Neville's right hand and saw that one of his fingers was bloody ... from where a ring had been violently ripped off hard enough to scrape the skin.

"Your Heir's ring! Oh, Neville ... *no!*"

"Save it for later, Theo. We're not out of the woods yet." Neville paused to glance around the Forest. "No pun intended."

With that, Neville recast his Patronus and Theo matched him, with Elby and Fiver taking up positions on either side Harry and Sirius. Above them, floating over the lake, the rogue Dementor registered its anger with a terrible wail that sounded like metal spikes dragged across a blackboard. The feelings of hope engendered by the Patronuses roused Harry from his brief stupor, and he looked up defiantly at the foul demon. In response, the Dementor waved its arms again, and even more of its fellows joined the attack on their position, swirly madly around the two Patronuses but just out of reach. It was clear that they were just waiting for Neville and Theo's concentration to lapse before attacking.

*"No! No, you bastard!" Harry thought angrily. "I may not have been able to save Remus Lupin or Marcus Flint, but I will not lose anyone else tonight!"*

As that thought energized the boy, he rose shakily to his feet. Then, he closed his eyes in concentration as he pulled forth every memory he had of his friends and especially Theo and Neville, who were reunited at last.

*"I'm not used to all this ... kindness stuff. I wasn't raised for it." "I don't know, Theo. I think you might just have a knack for it."*

*"And if I ever start to fall into real darkness...." "You'll have me there to catch you and pull you back."*

*"Neville and Hermione are my friends, and they're in trouble. So I'm there for them. Just like I'm there for you."*

*"You're better than you think you are, Harry. Don't ever believe otherwise."*

Harry opened his eyes and stared defiantly at the rogue Dementor with eyes that blazed the color of the Killing Curse. The rawest emotions surged through him despite his Occlumency because they were simply not the sort of emotions Occlumency was ever meant to contain – hope, friendship, loyalty, and above all, a righteous indignation at the thought of someone *daring* to threaten the people he loved.

Harry raised his wand.

"I may never have had a father worth a damn!" he shouted at the rogue Dementor. "But I have brothers! **AND I WILL NEVER LET YOU TOUCH THEM! EXPECTO PATRONUM!**"

Magic blasted forth from Harry's wand, enveloping the Dementor in a silver miasma and causing it to howl in fury. The boy didn't let up though, pouring more and more of himself and his affection for Theo and Neville (and for Hermione and Blaise and Ginny and Luna and even Jim and Ron and *everyone* he'd come to consider a friend at Hogwarts) into the spell. The silver mist grew brighter and thicker until, in a flash, it collapsed into a solid form.

And to its surprise and dismay, the rogue Dementor suddenly found itself wrapped up in the coils of a twelve-foot-long silver boa constrictor!

But to Harry's delight, it wasn't just *any* snake he'd summoned into existence – it was *that* snake. The boa constrictor he'd met at the London Zoo in the summer of 1991. The first snake to whom he'd ever *spoken*. The first living creature that had ever called Harry "*friend*."

Harry laughed ... and then *hissed*. "*Nice to sssee you again, Amigo. Would you pleassse do me a favor and sssqueeze that ugly bastard until it ssscreams?*"

"Ki-ki-ki!" the Patronus laughed back before tightening its coils.

In response, the horrible sounds of the rogue Dementor grew even louder, while the other Dementors broke their formation and drew back in confusion. Instantly, Theo and Neville renewed their own Patronuses, and a few seconds later, the rogue Dementor's troubles worsened as Elby dug into its body with silver teeth and claws while Fiver proceeded to kick it in the head repeatedly, with each kick triggering a flash of light like an electrical discharge.

Theo and Neville moved next to Harry, and all three were pointing their wands in unison. Three wizards, three

friends, three brothers, bound together by fate and circumstance with unbreakable bonds. Above them, Amigo, Elby, and Fiver continued their assault on the Dementor whose screams now sounded less like anger and more like fear.

As the boys continued their joint attack, they noticed something unusual: All three of their Patronuses began to glow *brighter and brighter* even as the Dementor struggled more and more until, unexpectedly, all four of them were engulfed in a bonfire of silver flames that grew so bright that it was hard to watch. The brightness grew and grew until it finally *exploded* in a shock wave of force that knocked Harry, Neville and Theo onto their backs. The three boys scrambled to their feet instantly and prepared to recast their Patronuses.

But it wasn't necessary – the snake, the bear, and the rabbit were all still there, floating a few feet above the lake. Neville, who'd had the most experience with a corporeal Patronus, was surprised to realize that he felt very little of the physical or mental strain that he'd come to expect from summoning Elby, and he knew somehow that Harry and Theo felt the same. For them, the Patronus Charm was now ... *easy*.

And in the space where the rogue Dementor had been, there was nothing left but a few scraps of smoking rags that slowly floated down to the surface of the lake where they sizzled for a few seconds before sinking beneath the dark waters.

It was all that remained of a creature that, until that moment, was believed *impervious to death*!

Neville, ever the Gryffindor, took two steps forward and yelled up at the ninety-nine remaining Dementors who floated above them while observing the scene.

"Right, you lot! Who's next?!"

The Dementors slowly floated back up into the sky.

## Chapter End Notes

Next: The Hunting of Sirius Black (Conclusion)

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P\*\*\*\*\*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2 (What the Sinister Man is reading):

Nothing new at the moment as far as HP fanfics go.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors:

ACI100, Adam Sitrich, Essay of Thoughts (Aich), FeatheryMinx, Flareix\_, HB, Miss Andrist, meyer, Mr Yarrow etc., , Prince of Conspiracy, ProgKingHughesker, rdgbraz, Team Frigg, TylerRVG, and Vin5. Thanks guys!

AN4: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 12,523 (top 13 among HP fanfics). Followers: 13,813 (top 11). Favorites: 12,017 (top 33). Communities: 212. Discord followers: Over 2000! Go Team POS!

# **The Hunting of Sirius Black (Conclusion)**

## Chapter Notes

SHAMELESS PLUG!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

## ***Chapter 41: The Hunting of Sirius Black (Conclusion)***

***27 March 1994***

***The Hogwarts Main Foyer***

***8:40 p.m.***

Minerva McGonagall had been grading papers when she was startled by a gleaming stag Patronus appearing in her office to announce that James Potter and a squad of Aurors were coming to Hogwarts to investigate a *murder*. Moments later, she was at the front doors of the castle and was understandably vexed to see Jim Potter and Ron Weasley preparing to open the doors themselves.

"Mr. Potter! Mr. Weasley! It is quite late, and curfew will soon be in effect. This is no time to be outside."

"Professor, what's going on?" Jim asked anxiously. "We were in the Astronomy Tower, and we saw something strange happening in the Forbidden Forest. There was a weird light, and then the Dementors all went down to investigate. And ... I think I heard my godfather using the Sonorous Charm and saying something about ... Sirius Black!"

"Mr. Potter!" McGonagall said again with strained asperity. "At the moment, I know nothing about those matters, but your father will be here momentarily. *If he asks for your presence, you may remain.* Otherwise, you will return to Gryffindor Tower *at once!* Do I make myself clear?"

Both boys nodded, and the professor stepped forward to unbar the door. Then, she stepped out onto the porch to meet the Chief Auror and the squad that accompanied him.

---

### ***Meanwhile in the Forbidden Forest...***

While the Dementors were momentarily cowed, the quartet made their way swiftly around the lake towards the edge of the Forest.

"So if we can't take Sirius to the Chamber of Secrets," Neville asked, "where *are* we taking him?"

"The Quidditch lockers. My broom is locked up there."

Sirius frowned. "Unless they've redone the grounds since I was here last, those lockers are on the opposite side of the school. Given all the commotion we've made, can we get that far without being spotted?"



Harry stopped suddenly and put up his hand. Then, he waved his wand and whispered the incantation for the Supersensory Charm.

"Apparently not," he whispered angrily. "I can see James ... and it looks like a half-dozen Aurors. They've just entered the gates and are headed for the castle.

"Is there another way out of here?" Neville asked. Theo looked thoughtful and then turned to Sirius.

"Mr. Black, how were you in Care of Magical Creatures?"

"Call me Sirius. And I took it all the way to NEWTs and got an O." Sirius looked at the boy suspiciously. "Why?"

---

### ***Moments later ...***

The clearing where the Hippogriff herd rested during the nights was uncomfortably near the edge of the Forest, specifically Hagrid's hut. But it was still *inside* the Forest which the Aurors had not yet begun to search. Neville, ever the Gryffindor, took point by slowly walking up to Buckbeak (who was still wide awake) and bowing respectfully. After a few tense seconds, Buckbeak returned the bow, and Neville led the creature over towards the others.

Sirius looked at the Hippogriff dubiously. He had, in fact, ridden a Hippogriff during his school days, though he'd been a Sixth Year NEWT student at the time. He was astonished (and slightly horrified) to know that his godson had done so on the very first day of CoMC. Then, he eyed Buckbeak with trepidation before shrugging almost casually.

"Oh, well. I'm sure it's just like riding a bicycle," he said.  
"Once you've done it, you never forget how."

"You know how to ride a bicycle?" Harry asked with some surprise.

"No, but I'm sure it's very similar to riding a Hippogriff."

Sirius and Harry both bowed to Buckbeak, who nodded and then unfurled its wings. Oddly, it seemed to understand what they were planning and (even more oddly) approved. Sirius moved to its side, but before he could mount, Harry grabbed him by the arm.

"Before you go, I need to tell you something," the boy said softly and with a more pensive expression than Sirius had ever seen on him.

"You'll probably need to make it quick, Harry," Sirius said with a chuckle. But then, he noticed the boy's expression and became more earnest.

"Sirius, I have to tell you ...." Harry rubbed his eyes and took a deep breath. "We warned you earlier tonight that Greyback was coming after you with his full intelligence thanks to the potion that Pettigrew gave him. What I *didn't* tell you was ... the potion was supposed to go to Remus Lupin, who was using the Shrieking Shack for his transformations. Pettigrew stole the potion from him. And then ...." Harry's eyes blinked rapidly. "He left me and James there tied up in the same room Lupin used to change and ...."

Sirius put a firm hand on his shoulder. "That must have been terrifying, Harry. I'm just glad you got away without being hurt."

Harry looked down at the ground. "I didn't ... *get away*, Sirius. I got my wand back and broke free of my bonds. But by then, Lupin ... he was right on top of me. I didn't have time to think, to come up with anything ...."

Suddenly, Harry began to cry. It was the most emotion Sirius had ever seen the boy reveal.

"Harry," he said. "Do you mean ... did you ...?"

"Y-yes, Sirius. I ... I killed Remus Lupin. I sorry. I ... I know he was your friend, and I didn't want to ...."

Before Harry could say anything else, Sirius pulled him into a tight hug.

"Shhh, Harry, shhh. It wasn't your fault. None of it. The bastard did to you what I once did to Snape – use our friend Remus like *a weapon*. You were as much a victim as Remus. *Do not* blame yourself."

"Do you ... do you hate me now because I'm a killer?" Harry asked softly, his face still buried in Sirius's shirt.

Sirius pulled back and lifted Harry's chin. "Did you do it out of malice? Were there any other options? No? Then, of course I don't hate you. I never could."

Harry sniffled. "James does."

Sirius's face darkened angrily. "James is a fool. And once I'm cleared, I'll tell him so to his face."

They both chuckled at that. Then, Sirius hugged Harry once more before climbing up onto Buckbeak's back. Seconds later, they were airborne and heading away from the school.

"Okay, *that's* done at least," Theo said as he watched the Hippogriff's departure. "Now what?"

"Now, we sneak you two into Hogwarts without you getting caught with me. James doesn't know either of you is involved, and I want to keep it that way."

"You don't need to face your father alone, Harry," Neville said.

"I have to face him eventually, Neville. Might as well get it over with. And there's no sense in involving you two when he doesn't know you're connected to Sirius or Azkaban or any of that business."

He smiled at his two friends. "At least you guys are speaking to one another again. If I'd known it was that easy to cure you of the Sanction, I'd have figured out how to get that ring off you long before now."

Neville tried to smile, but there was an unmistakeable sadness in his eyes. Theo reluctantly spoke up.

"Harry ... it wasn't just a matter of taking off his Heir's ring."

"Theo, it's not important now ...." Neville interrupted, but Harry's eyes flashed.

"What's not important? Tell me."

Neville sighed as Theo continued.

"To free himself from the Ultimate Sanction, Neville didn't just take off his ring. He did so as a conscious act of rejecting it and everything it stood for. He severed his connection to House Longbottom."

Harry was shocked. He turned to Neville. "You mean ... you won't be the Longbottom Heir anymore?"

Neville winced and looked almost bashful. "More like ... I won't be a *Longbottom* anymore. I won't be under the Sanction like Theo is, but ... as of tonight, I'm officially Neville No-Name."

He unexpectedly smiled.

"Which is kind of catchy now that I think about it." He turned to Theo. "Hey, after Hogwarts, we should move in together. We can tell everyone we're '*the No-Name Brothers*' and, I dunno, solve crimes together or something."

Theo smiled wanly. Harry didn't smile at all. He just wondered how many more disasters he'd have to sit through before the night was over.

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### ***Back at Hogwarts ...***

"Remus Lupin ... is dead?" McGonagall said in shock. "And ... he was *here at Hogwarts this whole time*? Disguised as Mr. Sturgeon? But how did I not recognize him?"

Behind her, Ron had his arm around Jim who was devastated at the news. The sound of his sobs tore at James's heart, but he was here in an official capacity now.

"Apparently, Albus summoned Remus here to Hogwarts to look after Jim undercover and placed him under a Fidelius. I myself was not made aware until earlier this evening. And now that Remus is ... dead, the Fidelius has failed since the subject matter of the Secret is no longer valid."

He took a step forward. "Professor, have you any way of knowing where my other son is? Or of finding him?"

"Not immediately, but I can order that all students report to their Common Rooms for a head count."

"Please do."

She stepped back into the castle. But before she could close the door, Jim slipped past her.

"Dad, is Uncle Pete okay? I heard his voice from the Forbidden Forest earlier! Is he out there somewhere?"

James's mouth froze as he struggled with how he could *possibly* answer such a question. Luckily (or unluckily, perhaps), he was saved by an unexpected interruption.

"Yes, Dad. Where is good old Uncle Pete?"

James turned in surprise. It was Harry emerging through a nearby archway in the wall that separated this part of the castle from the Forest and the Whomping Willow. Despite his time in the Forbidden Forest, the boy was not muddy or disheveled. Indeed, his hair was once again perfectly styled, a testament to Harry's skills at grooming Charms and the magic of Sleekeazy, a tube of which he naturally kept handy even when a prisoner or on the run for his life.

While Harry drew everyone's attention by boldly walking up to his father (for whatever sort of Gryffindorish confrontation the man wanted to have), Neville and Theo were sneaking around to a side entrance to the Castle. His friends were unhappy with this plan, but Harry knew such a confrontation was inevitable – he *had* Stunned the Chief Auror and Lord of his House, after all – so he figured it would be best to use it as a distraction.

To that end, Harry's plan was successful, as neither James nor Jim nor any of the Aurors spotted either Theo and Neville before they made it into the castle or a certain Hippogriff and its rider as they swiftly receded into the distance.

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***A certain private meeting room near the entrance to the Dungeons***  
***9:00 p.m.***

As Harry entered the meeting room, he wrinkled his nose in disdain. The room his father had picked for this "interview" was the same one Pettigrew had chosen during his Second Year – the meeting Harry had described as the "confidential threaten Harry session." There were no portraits here, and James wasted no time setting up the most powerful security Charms he knew before turning to face his Heir.

"Where is Sirius Black?" he said without preamble.

Harry gave him a disdainful look. "What's interesting about that question is that you assume I know anything at all. And you do so simply because Peter Pettigrew - the Death Eater who admitted to lying to you and betraying you for over a decade before leaving us both to die at the claws of a werewolf - suggested that I did."

James grew angry at Harry's impertinence, but, oddly, for the first time in many months, Harry honestly didn't care *at all* about what his father thought. Sirius was free, and soon, Scrimgeour would reveal the "*Marcellus Frump conspiracy*" to Wizarding Britain, proving that Black was innocent and wrongly convicted while exposing both Peter Pettigrew and Narcissa Black as Death Eaters.

Assuming, of course, that James didn't do the right thing himself by reopening the Black case while putting a warrant out for Pettigrew's arrest, but Harry was past waiting for James Potter to do the right thing. In any case, Sirius had already renewed his Godfather's Oath. At this point, even if James tried to disown him, Harry felt confident that Artie and Hestia could keep matters tied up in the Wizengamot until he came of age. But even if they couldn't, Harry would automatically become a Black if he were disowned as a Potter.

James stared at his son for several seconds, seemingly regarding him as he would any other criminal suspect.

"Okay, here's a different question." He took a step towards Harry. "What is the Prince of Slytherin?"

*That* question caught the boy by surprise. Not enough to cost him his composure, of course – by now he was a 4th Level Occlumens. But if James had possessed any degree of Legilimency himself, he would have detected a reaction of surprise quickly concealed.

"I don't understand," Harry answered. "We don't have *princes* in Wizarding Britain, and even if we did, Slytherin was never a Noble house."

"Stop evading!" James sputtered angrily. "I don't know what the words mean. But I know they mean something. *And I know you know what!*"

Harry stared at his father in confusion. This was *not* how he'd expected this conversation to go *at all*.

"Then first tell me what *you* know. And why this '*Prince of Slytherin*' business is so important to you."



James shook his head. "I can't. But I can tell you this. The Prince of Slytherin, whoever he is, *must never be a Potter!* I cannot stress to you how vital that is! *Everything* depends on it."

The kaleidoscope in Harry's head whirred and clicked and he gaped at James in astonishment.

"This ... this is why you've been acting this way," he said quietly. "From the very start! It's why you sent me that Howler on my very first day of school! You were afraid my Sorting meant that I would become not just a Slytherin, but the Prince of Slytherin!"

Then, despite himself, Harry let out a snort of laughter. "And all you could think to do about it was get drunk and then threaten me over it! Does Lily know all this?"

James nodded. "She does now. She didn't back then. For ... for what it's worth, she's on your side, though an oath prevents her from revealing anything about this." He looked away and blinked his eyes. "I'm probably going to lose her over this."

"You don't have to," Harry said calmly. "Lose her, that is. Or me. Just tell me what this is all about, and maybe we can resolve it."

James stared at him for several seconds, enough for Harry to become unnerved. Something in the man's expression looked ... *broken*.

"I'm sorry," the man finally said. "I truly am. I wish it were that easy. But I have no choice now." And then, he drew his wand.

Harry took a step back. "What are you doing?"

"Hadrian Remus Potter, I hereby accuse you of conspiring with the Death Eater Sirius Black and against the people and government of Wizarding Britain!"

"What?! Sirius Black is *innocent*! You *know* he's innocent! Pettigrew *admitted* it in front of you! Hell, he's probably the one who put Jim under the Imperius too!"

James flinched and looked away at that. Harry realized the truth at once and gaped in astonishment.

"No ... no, he didn't, did he! It was *you*! You put one of your own sons under the Imperius just to make him *hate* the other one!"

"I didn't ...!" James caught himself before making any fatal admissions. "That's not true," he said lamely.

Harry looked at his father with contempt. "Whatever. It doesn't matter. What matters is that Peter Pettigrew is the one who really betrayed our family. Sirius Black is innocent. And any day now, the truth will be revealed to everyone, and Sirius will be free!"

"Perhaps," James answered. "And if that happens, I hope he will forgive me for my sins against him. But *for now*, and in the eyes of the Wizengamot, Sirius Black is a Death Eater."

He stiffened and held his wand aloft.

"As the Lord of House Potter, I declare before Magic itself that I find the accusations of Peter Pettigrew that you have aided and abetted Sirius Black to be credible. And by providing such aid, you have proven yourself *a traitor to this nation*!"

Harry's eyes widened as he finally realized just what was happening. "No!" he spat.

"And so, as Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter, I, Iacomus Charlus Potter ..."

"Don't. You. *Dare!*"

"... do hereby invoke Sanctumen Ultimo and declare you Outcast ... *Hadrian Remus No-Name!*"

Rage, greater than any Harry had ever felt before, exploded across his mind, washing past his Occlumency shields like a typhoon. Instinctively, his hand twitched and prepared to spring his wand for a duel, even as his mind raced through every offensive spell he knew. The man was less than five feet away and already had his wand out. Harry would have to be faster than he'd ever been. Could James disarm Harry before the boy could get a spell off? Because if not, Harry had already dismembered a werewolf tonight with a Parselmagic Sectumsempra, and he suspected not even an Auror could cast a shield that would deflect it in time.

Because this was what Harry had realized in the split second after James had invoked the Ultimate Sanction: Unlike a standard disowning, the Sanction cut through all existing oath-based connections recognized by the Wizengamot. He'd studied the law thoroughly after Theo had been cursed with it, though he'd never *imagined* that James would be so cruel as to use it against him or even that he himself would be so foolish as to give him plausible grounds to do so. And Harry realized now just how bad this would be.

The Godfather Oath sworn by Sirius was nullified, and Sirius would not be able to otherwise adopt him without

first being sworn in officially as Lord Black ... at which point, *he too* would hate Harry irrationally despite all the time they'd spent together. Worse, an Outcast under the effects of the Ultimate Sanction could not claim *any* Noble inheritance. That meant that the inheritance he'd provisionally claimed through Lily's secret ancestry – and which he'd planned to use to *save Amy Wilkes from her forced marriage!* – would be denied to him. And the final insult: Even if staying at Hogwarts as a Slytherin for another *four years* was at all feasible, there was *no way* that the Hydra Throne would ever accept an Outcast as Prince.

At a stroke, he'd lost *everything*.

Everything but the possibility of revenge.

Harry's anger was so great that it had robbed him of the power to speak, the power to feel, and nearly the power to think. He remembered Neville, his compass, making him promise "*no death, dismemberment, or permanent injuries.*" He didn't care. He imagined Hermione begging him not to become a cold-blooded killer. He didn't care. He remembered the guilt he'd felt after killing Remus Lupin. He didn't care. He pictured Neville, Hermione *and* Theo standing between him and James and knowing that he'd have to cut through them to get to his father. He didn't care. He wondered briefly what Azkaban would be like, for he felt certain that he'd be sent there for killing the Lord of an Ancient and Noble House who was *also* Chief Auror, no matter how young he was.

And he didn't care.

The desire to see James Potter dead for this betrayal, for what he'd done to Harry and indirectly to Amy (and

probably Theo and Neville, once Harry could no longer protect them) overwhelmed every other thought. And the picture of James Potter, flying across the room *in bloody chunks*, filled every inch of his mind. Nothing could stop him from killing his father or dying in the attempt.

Until one thing did.

Because even as a homicidal rage stormed through Harry's mind, a completely unexpected realization suddenly came to him. "*I have felt this way before!*" The sudden and terrible sense of déjà vu surprised Harry so much that, despite himself, he instinctively opened a second thought stream to analyze it. And then, he remembered.

*"They told me you were both dead. That you were a drunk and were always on the dole. That my mother sold herself to pay for drugs for the both of you. That you killed yourself and mother while you were both drunk and high in an auto accident that I barely survived."*

*"Those were lies, Harry. Filthy awful lies."*

*"I know. I've always known that they were lying to me about my mother and father. But I never imagined that one day I'd wish it had been the truth."*

And then, 11-year-old Harry went inside and slammed the door in his father's face *because that was all he could do!* He'd only just gotten a wand. He didn't know a single spell. He knew he couldn't do *anything* to this preening man-child who had walked back into his life after putting him through ten years of *hell* and then expecting to just pick up where they'd left off as if nothing had happened between them. It would be many months before Harry found the strength to let go of that barely restrained homicidal impulse while talking to Neville by the shores of

Black Lake, and many, many more before he could entertain the merest possibility of forgiving his father. But on *that first day*, he'd have killed James Potter without hesitation if only he'd had the means.

It was only now, after years spent honing his Occlumency and Legilimency that he could feel that same rage again, compare it to his earlier rage, and detect something he'd never noticed before.

He could sense ... **it**.

He didn't know what **it** was, but he knew intuitively that **it** was the reason Muggles feared him. That **it** was the thing that Luna Lovegood could *not* see inside him because of how well it concealed itself (except for when she caught it by surprise and could sense **its** malice). And now, Harry realized, **it wanted** him to kill James. To give in to patricidal rage and cut down his own father in cold blood.

And Harry somehow knew that if he did so, **it** would win. And the boy would be lost to a fate he didn't understand except that it was somehow *worse* than death. Worse even than *Azkaban*.

Harry forced his wand hand to relax. From somewhere deep inside himself, he could almost hear the howl of impotent fury as **it** receded into the lowest, most primal depths of the boy's mind to hide once more.

The boy took three slow breaths before trusting himself to speak.

"Why?" he asked quietly. His tone was exactly the same as when he'd asked his father that question over a bowl of ice cream on his 11th birthday.

"I'm ... sorry. I can't ...."

"I was wrong, of course. I see that now. This *didn't* start with my Sorting. It started when *I was a baby*. Whatever is driving you to do this is also what got me sent to the Dursleys! It's because of you that my childhood was an absolute misery. And now, you've ruined *the rest of my life*. So, James Potter, you will tell me *why* you have done this to me, or you will admit to me now that the Lord of House Potter is a *COWARD WITH NO CONCEPT OF HONOR!*"

James took a step back despite himself in the face of Harry's accusations. He stared at the boy who had been his Heir before tonight and then swallowed painfully.

"I'll need you to swear an oath," he croaked in a voice just above a whisper. "A special one."

"Of course, you do," Harry said contemptuously. And then, he raised his wand and repeated the words of the Potter Oath as James provided for him.

*"I, Hadrian Remus ... No-Name, make this Oath on my magic and on my soul. That from this moment forward until the day I die, I will keep the Secret of House Potter in my heart and share it with no outsiders. Let Magic itself bind my tongue against revelation both deliberate and unintentional save when speaking to those who are already witness to the Secret. Let the Secret preserve itself not just against my betrayal but also my indiscretion. So mote it be."*

It was an unusual oath, and apparently one custom-designed for House Potter exclusively for the preservation of this family secret. It didn't punish Harry for revealing the Secret. It made him *physically incapable* of doing so. No Legilimens would ever be able to find it in his mind, and if

he tried to discuss any part of the Secret with someone who didn't already know it, then he would literally be unable to form the words. Indeed, he would find himself unable to speak about the Secret even with another sworn Potter if someone else was eavesdropping, even if Harry didn't know the eavesdropper was there!

As he completed the Oath, Harry No-Name felt tendrils of magic wriggle into his body from somewhere else and come to rest encircling his heart, his tongue, and the back of his head, and he knew that he was bound from that moment until the day he died.

"Satisfied?" he spat. "Now get on with it!"

James's face flushed at the disrespect, but then, he just shook it off. It wasn't as if he had any reason to think Harry would ever respect him again. He closed his eyes ... and began.

*"This is how our world will end, In a cold yet all-consuming flame."*

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***Potter Manor***  
***July 31, 1780***  
***11:49 p.m.***

The party had been a smashing success, and Lady Antigone Potter was justifiably proud. The crème de le crème of British Wizarding society had come to celebrate her recent ascension to the position of Minister of Magic, the youngest woman to ever be appointed to the position in any ICW member-nation since the passage of the Statute of Secrecy over 100 years earlier. In addition to the most influential British wizards and witches, her home had also been opened to foreign dignitaries from across Europe who had



come to fete the new Minister (and bend her ear to whatever diplomatic proposals their governments wished to promote).

Indeed, she was so pleased by how her party had gone that she hardly even cared that Lord Potter had also invited his mistress.

Upstairs, Nathaniel Potter poked his head into a large but mostly empty room on the second floor. He'd always thought that the house had too many parlors, and he'd been considering making this a music room or something. Of course, he didn't play himself, but he was thinking of taking up an instrument as a hobby. The cello, perhaps. Nathaniel's son and Heir, Hardwin Potter, had recently married and moved into a home of his own, and Nathaniel's "loving wife" spent every waking moment on dull politics. Consequently, Nathaniel anticipated lots of boredom in his future.

After all, it would be improper to sneak Cassandra into both his house and his marital bed *every* day.

"I say, is anyone in here?" he asked to the seemingly empty room before entering. "The coast, as the Muggles say, is clear."

The Lady Cassandra Trelawney followed him into the room still holding a glass of champagne. She looked around the dim parlor cautiously.

"Are you quite sure, Nathaniel? I'm certain I saw the Italian Ambassador heading up the stairs ahead of us."

Nathaniel laughed. "I do believe he's actually just an attaché, my pet, but to appease you, I'll check again." He

fake-coughed. "Ahem! I SAY, ARE THERE ANY DAGO DIPLOMATS HIDING ANYWHERE IN HERE?"

"*Nathaniel!*" Cassandra snapped as she swatted his arm with her hand. "This is an important night for your wife! And I will thank you not to embarrass her by insulting her guests with Muggle vulgarities!" She took a sip of champagne. "It's bad enough that you've dragged me away from such a delightful party for an assignation in a dimly-lit parlor!"

Nathaniel snorted. "She has her courtiers to fawn over her. That's all she needs to be happy. She can let me find my own happiness however I choose."

He leaned in closely to gently kiss the famous seer. She did not resist. After the kiss, he pulled back to look at her fondly.

"I should have married you," he said in a low husky voice. "No matter what your damnable cards said."

"The cards said *no*, Nat," she answered gently. "The orb, the mirror, and the bones all agreed. For all her faults, Antigone was the best match for you. If you are unhappy about it, you could always ask her to renew your marital vows and drink Amortentia with her again."

He reached up with a finger and carefully pushed aside a stray lock of her hair. "I'd rather have the real thing with you than the falsity of Amortentia with her."

"The Unspeakables *assure* us that there is no meaningful difference between the two."

"They're wrong. I should know."

And then, he leaned in to kiss her once more, this time with a fierce passion the seeress returned. The kiss lasted until it was interrupted by the sound of her champagne glass falling to the floor and shattering. The crash distracted Nathaniel for a moment, and he pulled away from the kiss ... and then staggered away in shock.

Cassandra Trelawney's eyes had gone solid white.

Her whole body was rigid and frozen, and yet her hair seemed to writhe around her as if it had come alive like the Medusa of legend. The temperature of the room plunged, and even as his breath suddenly fogged in front of his face, Nathaniel looked around wildly as he felt Magic and Fate swirling in the air around him like living things. The wizard tried to move back towards his lover, but he found himself frozen as well, a helpless witness to Prophecy. And when Cassandra finally spoke, it was with a voice not her own, one that was *alien* to this world, to Reality itself!

*This is how our world will end  
In a cold yet all-consuming flame.*

*In the Last Days, a Dark Lord, the Darkest Lord,  
Will reveal himself as both Savior and Betrayer  
By proclaiming his forbidden lineage to all.*

*He will break the Chains of Unity that bond us and bind us.  
He will defy all conventions of sanity and compassion.  
He will shatter the foundations of our covenant.*

*And in so doing, the Dark Lord will become a Dark God,  
And all shall tremble at his Apotheosis.  
He will stretch forth his hand.  
And every wand will snap,  
Every incantation will be silenced,  
Until we shall all be as the lowliest squib.*

*Yet helplessness is not our worst Fate.  
For when the Cold Flame has consumed the World,  
The Last Enemy to be conquered shall be **Death** .  
And the Victor of that final struggle shall claim  
Dominion over all that is,  
Whether for Oblivion... or Damnation.*

*For should the Dark God win that final battle,  
Then our world will be reborn in his image.  
A world of hate, of fear, of despair.  
A world of suffering without end.*

*And we shall be reborn into this Nightmare World  
Again and again and again.  
Trapped forever throughout all our lives  
In the Dark God's **HELL** !*

*And you shall know by these portents  
That the time of the Dark God approaches  
And the Destruction of our World  
Is close at hand:*

*When the Two who should be as One  
Are set against each other in reckless hate.  
And the Last Potter rises as the Prince of Slytherin.*

As Cassandra's final warning of "the Last Potter" and "the Prince of Slytherin" echoed through the room, her paralysis was finally broken. Her eyes returned to normal before rolling back up into her head. Her knees buckled and she began to fall. Luckily, her lover's own paralysis was broken as well, and he rushed forward to catch her before she hit the ground. He laid her gently to the floor and then patted her cheek until her eyes fluttered.

"Wh-what happened?" she asked weakly.

"You ... my love, I – I think you have just given a True Prophecy!"

She looked up at the man in confusion ... and then concern when she noted his expression. "Was it ... bad?" she asked.

Nathaniel hesitated. "I ... yes. Your words were ... terrible. I fear for us all now."

She struggled to sit up. "Then help me up, Nat. We must hasten to a pensieve! I would know what Fate compelled me to say! Only then can we make our plans!"

Dazedly, Lord Potter helped his mistress to stand and then they quickly left the room.

A few seconds of silence passed before the curtains that separated the large bay windows from the rest of the room were jerked aside, and the two figures who'd been hiding behind them stepped back into the room. One was a wizard with olive skin and jet-black hair who was busily stuffing the bottom of his expensive silk shirt back into his knee-length breeches before buttoning them back up. The other was a young British witch of perhaps twenty-five who was struggling to restore her petticoats to their proper position.

"What in Merlin's name was *that* all about?!" the young woman asked. "Did you *hear* what Lady Cassandra *said*?!"

"I did indeed, *cara mia*," the man answered in a cultured Italian accent.

"Well? Do you think that was really a True Prophecy?!"

Then, to the woman's shock, she suddenly noticed that her paramour had produced his wand and was now pointing it directly at her face.

"Do not trouble yourself about it, *cara mia*," said Armand Zabini, attaché to the Italian Ambassador and Heir to the House of Zabini. "It's not your concern. ***OBLIVIATE!***"

---

***Now ...***

"A prophecy! You have made my life an absolute misery since I was *in nappies* because of another damned prophecy!"

James winced at Harry's accusation. "Nathaniel, with the guidance of Cassandra Trelawney, took certain steps to ensure that the Prophecy would never come to pass. Or failing that, to delay it as long as possible. For 200 years, each generation of Potters has only produced one child, always a boy. And we've always taught our children how *not* to be Sorted into Slytherin. And it *worked* until ...."

"Until you had twins," Harry said coldly. "And then decided to handle the situation as stupidly as possible."

The man ignored the insult. "I didn't even know the Prophecy myself until well after you and Jim were born. My own parents were planning to tell me when I turned 21, but they were both dead by then, and we were all living in Godric's Hollow instead of Potter Manor. I just happened to find a copy of the Prophecy orb in my father's safe when we returned to the Manor months after You-Know-Who's attack."

"At which point, you decided that I and *my twin brother* were *doomed* to be set against each other in reckless hate, so you sent me off to be abused by Muggles for ten years."

"I DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT THAT!" James yelled in anguish. "I'm sorry, Harry! Believe me! I never wanted anything like that to happen to you!"

He rubbed his face with his hand before continuing. "The Healers said that you were a squib and that you were likely a squib *because* of something Jim did to your magic in the course of vanquishing You-Know-Who! I couldn't take the chance that you'd be jealous of Jim's power and fame. That you'd try to reclaim your magic somehow by hurting him. That you'd hate us all because we had magic and you didn't. So ... I sent you to Petunia. I thought it was for the Greater Good."

"For the Greater Good," Harry scoffed. "You know, I had a conversation last year with the Headmaster. And he told me that he thought '*for the Greater Good*' were the four most dangerous words in the English language. Because people can use them to excuse *anything* if they persuade themselves that it's worth it in the end."

Then, Harry raised his chin defiantly. "So anyway, you sent me to the Dursleys because you thought I was a squib and then washed your hands of me. But later, I came to Hogwarts as a wizard. And while we didn't get along at first, Jim and I eventually came together. *We were getting along fine!* If your big fear was me and Jim locked together in reckless hate, then *why the hell would you Imperio Jim to hate me?!*"

James stood abashed at the question. "That was ... unintentional. I heard from him about your connection to the Prince of Slytherin. Ron remembered from his possession that you and Tom Riddle had talked about it, and ... I panicked. I didn't want him to hate you. I just wanted him to let me know if you did anything ... suspicious. But the

spell went wrong somehow. And I will be ashamed of myself for that moment of weakness until the day I die."

"But not ashamed of what you've done to me," Harry said bluntly.

"No, I *will* always be ashamed of this! I will *always* regret this, Harry, with all my heart!" James exclaimed, his voice breaking. "I know you won't believe me. But I *never* wanted any of this to happen. But you *know* the Prophecy now! *The whole world burning and then turning into HELL!* Literally *everything* is at stake! I would *die myself* if it meant saving the world from that. But ... that's not an option. All I can do is whatever I can to make sure you *don't* become the Prince of Slytherin. Or if I can't stop that, then make sure you're not a Potter when it happens. Those are the only options Fate has left me. I ... I hope someday you'll understand and, perhaps, forgive me."

Harry just stared at him.

"Will that be all ... Lord Potter?" he finally said in a voice like ice.

"I ... I won't file the official paperwork until Monday. The Wizengamot doesn't meet until then anyway. So no one will ... will *hate* you for the Sanction until then. And your trust vault will still be yours, even after the Sanction goes into effect. I'll transfer some more money into it this weekend. Fifty thousand galleons. That'll be enough for you to start over ... far from here."

Harry continued to stare.

"Will that be *all*, Lord Potter?" he repeated.



James nodded weakly. Harry walked past him towards the door before stopping and reaching into his pocket to pull out Peter's wand which he handed over.

"Pettigrew's wand. It'll show he used all three Unforgivables today. Unless you just plan to cover it up because that's easier than admitting you blindly trusted a Death Eater for all these years. Easy solutions seem to be your style."

James took the wand. "I promise you, Harry. Peter Pettigrew *will* be brought to justice for what he did tonight. I *promise* you."

Harry snorted contemptuously. The man's promises meant nothing to him at this point.

"You know, I do think you're definitely wrong about one thing."

"Only one?" James said in a weak attempt at humor. Harry ignored him.

"*The Two who should be as One set against each other in reckless Hate.* You assume that's me and Jim. But I think you're wrong. I think the Two who should be as One refers to a Lord and his Heir who should be united as one in support of their House."

Harry narrowed his eyes, and James leaned back at the sight of their intensity.

"And I promise – I will *never* stop hating you for what you've done to me today. Never. *I will hate you from beyond the grave for this.*"

And then, without another word, Harry moved to the door to open it ... only to see Jim waiting out in the hall for the meeting to conclude.

"Harry?" Jim asked uncertainly.

"Congratulations, *Potter*," Harry said with a sneer. "You win." And then, he strode past his former brother without another concern. Jim watched him go and then turned to his father.

"What did you *do*?" he asked with an angry, suspicious glare.

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### ***Out in the hallway ...***

Upon leaving the meeting room, Harry had the first bit of good news he'd seen in hours – Severus Snape was alive and waiting for him.

"I am ... pleased to see you, Professor. Peter Pettigrew indicated that he'd left you to die."

Snape sneered. "Did he? Well, I hope you are astute enough not to take the word of someone like him at face value. Come, Mr. Potter. It is after curfew, and I will escort you to the dungeons."

Snape turned and headed down the stairs with Harry falling into step beside him.

"You should probably know, sir – Potter's not my name anymore. It's *Harry No-Name* now."

Snape hissed at that and then muttered something barely audible about "*contemptible swine*."

"I see," he said aloud. "I'm sure I don't need to explain to you the difficulties this will present for you going forward."

"No, sir. You do not."

"Likewise, I'm sure I don't need to explain to you that these difficulties are not insurmountable. I have spent the better part of three years inculcating Slytherin values in you for a reason. No matter how dire the situation, I expect you to adapt with your usual cunning and poise and overcome it."

"I will do my best, sir." Harry paused. "By the way, how *are* you still alive?"

"I was taken prisoner by a *Gryffindor* who imagines himself to be a dark wizard. Rather than eliminating me in any remotely sensible way, he left me in a contrived death trap which he constructed according to *my own* advice. He had given me Veritaserum from my own stocks, you see."

Harry nodded. "And since it was your own stocks, you were unaffected by it?"

"Regrettably, that was not the case. I was affected normally. However, I am a master Occlumens, and one of the higher-order Occlumency techniques involves the creation of contingent secondary personalities. For example, in the event I am given Veritaserum, several contingencies may come into play, and one of them is automatically triggered whenever I am asked a question for which a truthful response will likely lead to my immediate death. In such a case, the secondary persona fabricates a lie that will extricate me from danger and induces my primary persona to temporarily believe it to be true. In this instance, Pettigrew asked me for a recommendation as to how he could murder me in an engineered potions accident. The contingency activated, and Pettigrew left me unconscious

near a potion that I had told him would produce a poisonous gas, but which was actually a pain remedy for rheumatoid arthritis."

"Brilliant, Professor."

Snape's expression soured.

"Not brilliant enough, I fear. The process of designing and implementing such contingency personalities is time-consuming, and I had not yet had the opportunity to develop any such contingency regarding the Wolfsbane Potion. Pettigrew now knows everything that I know about it. It will take him time to find someone competent to brew it successfully, but eventually, he will be able to provide transformed werewolves with human intelligence. A fearsome prospect for the entire world."

Harry nodded but said nothing. They continued in silence until they reached the door to the Slytherin dormitory.

"What do you plan to do next, Mr. P- ... Mr. No-Name?"

"I plan to go to bed, Professor Snape. It's been a very long day, and I'm tired. I have another three days before Lord Potter files the paperwork to finalize the Ultimate Sanction. Hopefully, I'll figure out something clever. Or failing that, maybe a miracle will happen. Surely I'm due one by now."

"Slytherins make their own miracles, Mr. ... Harry. Do not give up hope."

Harry had no response for that. He entered the dormitory but didn't stop to speak with anyone else before heading up to his room. Not for the first time, he found himself very glad that Slytherin rooms were now private. Once inside, he

quickly changed clothes and got into bed. He glanced at his watch. Amazingly, it wasn't even 10 o'clock yet.

Suddenly, his attention was drawn to a soft ringing from his bag. Harry sighed in resignation and reached down for it. Inside was the parchment he shared with Hermione, which he withdrew and activated.

**Hermione:** *Harry? Are you there? Please answer me.*

**Harry:** *I'm here, Hermione. What's up?*

**Hermione:** *Don't "What's up?" me, Harry Potter. First, Neville came back to the Tower looking as though he'd run a marathon and implying that he'd been disowned. Then, Jim came back looking as though he'd been crying. And now, I find that Aurors have come to Hogwarts and that there are werewolves in the Forbidden Forest and the Caretaker is dead and Neville just says, "talk to Harry!" So, what on Earth has been going on?*

**Harry:** *Well first of all, don't call me Harry Potter anymore. And kindly let Neville know that I'll need a room with him and Theo as, apparently, we're going to be the No-Name triplets.*

There was a pause of several seconds.

**Hermione:** *He didn't!*

**Harry:** *He did.*

**Hermione:** *That \*%!\*\$# &!*

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Harry laughed out loud.

**Harry:** *Hermione, did you add something to these parchments to censor profanity?*

**Hermione:** *... maybe. But that doesn't matter! How could he do something like that to you!*

Harry started to write a response, but his hand froze over the parchment. In his chest, he could suddenly feel the magic of the Potter Oath constricting him, ensuring that telling Hermione anything about the matter that he shouldn't was simply impossible now. He huffed to himself and then set the quill to the parchment.

**Harry:** *He has his reasons. I think they're stupid reasons, but he has them. That's all I can say.*

**Hermione:** *Harry, please – tell me what all happened tonight!*

**Harry:** *Honestly, Hermione. I don't even know what I can say to you. I'm under two different binding oaths right now! All I can really say is that I watched Marcus Flint get murdered by Peter Pettigrew, and then I had to kill a werewolf in self-defense, and then my father finally found a trumped-up reason to disown me but went the extra mile of using the Ultimate Sanction to do it.*

**Harry:** *Oh, and Pettigrew the Death Eater got away with a formula that will allow werewolves to maintain their intelligence while transformed, so we also have a Werewolf Apocalypse to worry about. I suppose I should mention that instead of just whinging about my own personal problems.*

**Hermione:** *A ... Werewolf ... Apocalypse.*

**Harry:** *Yes. A Werewolf Apocalypse.*

**Hermione:** *Well, that sounds dreadful, and I should probably practice Sectumsempra tomorrow just to be on the safe side.*

**Harry:** *You should. It works very well for that purpose.*

**Hermione:** *AHEM! As I was about to say, none of that is your fault. Peter Pettigrew is the villain. And, I suppose, so is your father who I have decided is a vile fiend. But not you.*

**Harry:** *I don't know, Hermione. There's plenty of blame to share. I mean, none of this would have happened if I hadn't let Mr. Sturgeon have my map.*

**Hermione:** *I have no idea what that means.*

**Harry:** *Long story. Let's just say that yesterday morning, I foolishly allowed Mr. Sturgeon who was also Remus Lupin under a Fidelius and thus a close friend of Peter Pettigrew to have a magical map I had in my possession and that's what started all of this.*

The Gryffindor witch didn't respond for nearly thirty seconds. Harry assumed she'd spent all that time unpacking his last message which he suddenly realized contained a lot of information poorly arranged.

**Hermione:** *So if you hadn't given the Caretaker this magical map, we would not now be facing an army of werewolves under the command of a Death Eater who is also armed with a law degree?*

**Harry:** *Pretty much. Now if you have no further questions, Hermione, I'm really pretty tired right now. Also depressed and violently angry towards a certain Chief Auror, but mainly tired.*

**Hermione:** *Okay.*

**Hermione:** *Harry, can you meet with me in the morning? In the room that the Goldstein Group was using for our Ancient Runes project?*

**Harry:** *I suppose so. What time?*

**Hermione:** *9: 15. Exactly. No sooner, no later.*

**Harry:** *I've got Ancient Runes then. Come to think of it, so do you.*

**Hermione:** *Skip it.*

**Harry:** *And why should I skip class to help you and Anthony with your little project?*

There was a second pause, a much longer one, before she finally answered.

**Hermione:** *Because it will change your life.*

**Hermione:** *Tomorrow morning at 9:15. See you then. Good night, Harry.*

Harry stared at his friend's last cryptic message for several minutes before he finally put the parchment away and tried to get some sleep.

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**28 March 1994**  
**7:30 a.m.**

Harry was reluctantly on his way down to breakfast when he heard the unmistakable sound of Augusta Longbottom's angry voice in a Howler addressed to Neville that had just erupted at the Gryffindor table. He glanced in to see Neville



accepting the verbal assault stoically before turning away. It was yet another thing for Harry to feel guilty over, and as the boy had quite enough of those in his life right now, he chose to forego breakfast rather than witness the scene. In any case, he was distracted from the Howler by the approach of one of the Slytherin prefects who handed him a message and then quickly left without even speaking to him.

*Harry -*

*I returned to Hogwarts late last night in response to a Patronus message from Professor Snape but felt it best to let you get some rest. I should very much like to speak to you about last night's events before the start of this morning's classes. Please come to my office as soon as you get this missive. I am very partial to Chocolate Frogs.*

*The Headmaster*

He stared at the letter for a long moment before trudging off in the direction of Dumbledore's office.

---

Ten minutes later, the young Slytherin was seated in front of the old wizard's desk. Dumbledore was looking at him with great sadness and, Harry suspected, some measure of guilt, though the boy didn't know why. He glanced around the room and noticed the portraits were stilled. This would be a private conversation.

"Mr. - Harry. I ... I cannot express to you how sorry I am that this happened. I never imagined that James would go to such lengths as this. I just wanted you to know that I will help you in any way I can to overcome this ... curse."

"Thank you, Headmaster. I'm grateful. Although I think Theo and Neville will probably need more help than I will."

"Of course. Please let them know that the offer extends to them as well."

Dumbledore looked at Harry strangely for a moment as if considering his next words. Harry returned the scrutiny, and after a moment of thought, he realized that he did *not* feel the constriction of the Potter Oath in this room. Suddenly, he thought he knew why the portraits had been stilled.

"Sir ... do you *know* why James used the Ultimate Sanction on me? *Specifically*?"

The old man hesitated before finally nodding. "Yes, Harry. James swore me to the Potter Oath at the end of your First Year after your confrontation with Voldemort. It was the only way he would reveal to me the Prophecy which was the reason for his unnatural hostility towards you."

"You've known all this time?!"

"Yes. But I have also learned through painful experience that trying to circumvent a True Prophecy is a recipe for disaster. Indeed, I learned that lesson most explicitly just before your father shared the information with me, when I realized how my efforts to circumvent the Prophecy regarding your brother had failed so disastrously. I could not persuade your father to be more reasonable, but neither could I intervene directly. Aside from the effects of the oath I swore to him, it would have been difficult for me to provide any meaningful assistance for legal and political reasons. As Headmaster of Hogwarts, I have considerable power to influence the lives of orphans and Muggleborns through my *in loco parentis* authority. But when a child's

parents are not only living, but also extremely influential and politically powerful individuals, my authority is much more constrained.

"And so, I decided the safest course of action was to simply *ignore* the Potter Prophecy completely and treat you like I would any other student." Then, he coughed with mild embarrassment. "Well, any other student who was an undeniably gifted Heir to an Ancient and Noble House, at least."

Harry chuckled. "I thank you for that, sir. That was probably the smart play. Oh, not to change of topic, but you should know that I was never able to figure out that Remus Lupin was a werewolf until Pettigrew showed me the parchment with the Secret written on it. I'm pretty sure I was *told* that Lupin was a werewolf at least twice but could never hold the information in my head."

"Thank you for letting me know. Though I deeply regret now my decision to involve you in that experiment. Perhaps if you'd known all along about Remus's condition, things might have played out differently with Mr. Pettigrew ... and Remus himself." He looked at the boy sadly. "How are you holding up after ... what happened to Remus?"

"I ... don't know. I still feel there was no other way. I literally had a split second to decide what to do...."

"And you did the only thing you could. I insisted that James provide me with a pensieve memory of that encounter. While I cannot do anything to reverse the Ultimate Sanction, if he or anyone else attempts to threaten you with any legal consequences, I would be happy to testify on your behalf that it was self-defense."

"I appreciate that, Headmaster. So ... you know I'm a Parselmouth, then."

"I did notice that detail, yes. Though to be honest, I'd suspected as much since Jim was revealed as one last year. The idea that he acquired the gift through a '*magical right of conquest*' always struck me as nonsensical. And given your own circumstances, I can hardly begrudge your decision to conceal that ability. I must confess that I am unfamiliar with the precise curse you used. I believe the incantation was ... *Sectumsempra*?"

"Er, yes," Harry said in surprise. "Professor ... are *you* a Parselmouth?"

Dumbledore smiled. "I have always been fascinated with magical languages, and I undertook a study of Parseltongue as a side project in my younger days. Regrettably, I had a mild stammer as a child, and while I overcame it in my normal speech through diligent effort, it remained just prominent enough to prevent me from correctly pronouncing words in Parseltongue. I do *understand* it fluently, though. As for the Curse you used, I did not recognize it, but I surmise it was simply a heavily modified Lacero interwoven with the Weeping Blood Curse. While the DMLE would likely classify it as *dark magic*, it is obviously uniquely suited for use against werewolves, and I would testify to that as well if you should need me to do so."

"Thank you, Headmaster. I'm ... sorry about Mr. Lupin. I know he was a friend of yours and, of course, very close to Jim. I wish there had been another way."

Then, Harry grew thoughtful. "Actually, there's one thing that might have caused events to play out differently. I mean, not once we were already tied up in the Shrieking

Shack, but earlier perhaps. Did you ever have any luck getting a copy of that potion from the Unspeakables? The one that counteracts the potion Pettigrew used to Memory Charm my ... I mean, Lily and James to forget who their Secret Keeper was?"

Dumbledore looked chagrined. "In point of fact, Saul Croaker gave me several vials of the antidote in question a few days ago, along with a sample of the potion itself. I had resolved to meet with Lily and James next week upon my return from Paris and persuade them to try the antidote. In retrospect, I should have done so earlier, and all of this might have been avoided."

"You couldn't have known that ahead of time, sir," Harry said reassuringly. "It's not like you could know the future."

Dumbledore said nothing, but he suddenly leaned forward in his chair and stared at Harry with an odd intensity.

"Sir?" Harry asked cautiously.

Dumbledore shook his head. "Nothing, Harry. Nothing. Just ... an old man's fancy. Tell me, have you any particular plans for the morning? You've had a great trauma, and I would understand if you would like to ... take some time off and think about things. Or perhaps spend time with friends?"

Harry shrugged. "No particular plans other than classes. I have to meet with Hermione at some point this morning, though she's being cryptic about what."

"... is she indeed?" Dumbledore said quietly. Then, he reached into his desk and produced a hall pass upon which he wrote a message and signed his name. "Here, take this. Consider it an all-purpose pass to get out of any classes you need."

Harry took the pass and examined it. "There's no date."

"Of course not, Harry. Take whatever time you need."

The boy smiled. "Thank you, sir. I appreciate it."

"Now, you'd better head along to your meeting with Miss Granger. I'm sure it will be of great importance."

"Honestly," Harry said, "I think she just wants me to help her with a project."

"I have no doubt it's probably a very important one," Dumbledore said with twinkling eyes.

Harry got up to leave the office, but just as he got to the door, the Headmaster called out to him.

"Harry, if anything happens and you need me – really, truly *need me* at that exact moment in time – just have someone send me a Patronus and I will come at once." The old man bent his head down and looked at Harry over his spectacles. "Obviously, this is not something that you should abuse for frivolous purposes."

"I ... wouldn't dream of it, Headmaster." The boy hesitated. "Is there any particular message I should send?"

Dumbledore considered for a moment before smiling at the boy. "*Tempus fugit.*"

"... okay?" Harry said cautiously as he was unfamiliar with the expression. "Have a good day, sir, and thanks for everything!" He turned and left the office, slightly flummoxed by the odd conversation he and Dumbledore had.

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**9:15 a.m.**

Despite his all-purpose hall pass, Harry chose to skip breakfast due to a strong desire not to talk to anyone. Instead, he simply wandered around the school, taking in its sights. He had little expectations of staying here much longer, but he wanted to carry as many memories away with him as possible.

At nine o'clock, Harry started his way towards the classroom-cum-laboratory where Anthony, Su, and Hermione had been conducting experiment into how best to knock Gryffindors unconscious for fun and profit. Fifteen minutes later, he stood at the door to the classroom and wondered what on Earth "*because it will change your life*" might mean. Deciding it probably couldn't make his life any worse, he opened the door ...

And froze in surprise.

Hermione was inside waiting for him by the table that she and the two Ravenclaws had enchanted to fire off a mass Stunner whenever a trigger word was said. But right now, he was less interested in the table than in the object that was sitting on it. It was a strange-looking thing, roughly a foot tall and three feet wide, but it was so oddly shaped that its true dimensions would have been hard to guess. It reminded Harry vaguely of a toy that the Dursleys had bought for Dudley when he'd been 7 or 8: the Rubik's Snake. Naturally, solving the puzzles had been completely beyond Dudley Dursley's ability, and such toys usually ended up in small pieces after a few days of being used to hit Harry in the head.

The object Hermione was currently manipulating was something of that nature but much larger and far more

intricate – a complex 3D puzzle with lots of moving parts that could be rotated and spun into a dazzling assortment of different geometric shapes. The exterior sides were coated in a chrome-like metal, while the interior sections were black but with arrays of tiny knobs and dials on each interior surface. The puzzle looked unusual and quite fascinating, so much so that for a second, Harry almost missed the other (and likely more important) detail about the room:

*The fact that there were two unconscious men lying on the floor, one of whom he recognized as Saul Croaker, the Voice of the Unspeakables !*

"Hermione?" he inquired nervously.

"Come in and close the door, please," she said without looking up from the puzzle box. As she spoke, she rotated different sections of it into new shapes before pausing to consult some notes on the table beside the puzzle.

Harry nervously shut the door behind him and moved closer to the table, his gaze constantly shifting between Hermione, the puzzle box, and the unconscious wizards as he tried to fathom *what the hell was going on!* Then, he got close enough to see Hermione's notes at last. They appeared to be the witch's Divination project, which was a horoscope she'd done of *him*.

Before he could speak, Hermione looked up at him with a frighteningly intense expression. "I do hate to keep harping on this, but it might be very important. You're *sure* you were born at 11:52 on July 31st?"

"Um, yeah. So ... is that Saul Croaker of the Unspeakables?"



"Yes," she said as she returned to rotating different sections of the puzzle box. "The other one is Unspeakable Number 17. Apparently, they go by numbers. Like James Bond, I suppose." She paused. "Justin *did* explain about James Bond, didn't he?"

"Yeah. Bond, James Bond, and all that." He frowned at the non sequitur before trying to get the conversation back on track. "So ... *why* are there two Unspeakables unconscious on the floor?"

"Because I stunned them," she said before making one final adjustment. Then, she pushed two large pieces of the puzzle box from opposite sides, and the different sections of the box suddenly slipped into place together neatly to form a perfect cube, which she immediately spun 180 degrees before pushing the whole thing towards Harry. He looked down at it and noticed that on the top where the different sections had come together there was a small circular piece right in the middle that was a slightly different color than the rest of the puzzle. Almost as if it were a button to be pressed.

"Okay!" Hermione exclaimed brightly. "It's armed. Just press that button and we're ready to go!"

Harry stared at his friend with a more dubious expression than he'd ever given her since the day they first met.

"Um ... no?"

"Harry!"

"No, Hermione. I'm not pressing a strange button on a strange box that you apparently *mugged* two Unspeakables to get! And which you then ... *armed*! Not without you

telling me *what in Merlin's name is going on?!*" He looked back down at the strange box. "What is this thing, anyway?"

"It's called a Cryptohedron," she answered.

"That tells me nothing," he spat. "That doesn't even sound like a real word!"

"Harry, do you trust me?" Immediately, the boy put up a hand to stop her.

"No, no, no! Don't play that card on me, Hermione. Not like this! I've been through too much in the last day for it!"

"Harry! I *know* what you've been through. That's *why* I asked you to come. All year long, you've known about my *weirdness*. Known about it and tolerated it. Well finally, we're at the end. The moment when I can answer all your questions about what I've been doing and why. I promised you that what I had to show you could change your life, and it *really* can! Just trust me one last time and press that button. And then, I can *finally* tell you *everything!*"

Harry stared at Hermione for what seemed like ages before his hand slowly made its way to the center of the Cryptohedron.

"You'd better," he said as he pressed the button.

Instantly, the seams of the Cryptohedron flashed brightly before fusing together so that the cube now appeared to be solid chrome. Then, it gently floated up into the air before it started to rotate, slowly at first but then faster. As it moved, Harry noticed that the object's shape was changing. Where it started as a perfect cube, gradually the corners began to distort and sink into the object to produce additional planed

surfaces. First, it was a six-sided cube. Then, it had seven sides. Then, eight, twelve, twenty, more.

As this continued, Harry opened up his Legilimency senses to better understand what he was seeing ... and then he *reeled*. Though he could barely understand the impressions he received, he suddenly understood that this "Cryptohedron" wasn't changing its shape at all. Rather, its *true* shape was something that could not be fully perceived. Not by him, not by anyone in this world. Only when it moved did it allow other aspects of its true form to be observable. The sudden realization caused Harry a moment of vertigo, and he quickly shut off his Legilimency.

After about twenty seconds of rotation, the Cryptohedron had formed so many sides (or appeared to have done so, anyway) that it was virtually a sphere, though Harry knew this was just an illusion. In truth, the Cryptohedron was still a polyhedral shape, but with far too many sides to count while it was in motion. Finally, the object slowed to a stop, still in mid-air, and then reversed direction. Gradually, it now appeared to *lose* sides until, after twenty seconds or so, it was once more in the (apparent) shape of a cube. It then floated back down to settle into its original position.

Harry was about to speak when Hermione put up a hand to shush him. There was another flash of light from the cube, along with the sound of gears in motion. Where before, the Cryptohedron appeared to be a single solid cube, it now looked as though it were made of dozens and dozens of tiny cubes stacked together. Then, the smaller cubes began to move, starting with those on top which slid up and out from the center, and then those on the lower levels which did the same. As the cubes separated, the whole thing started to resemble a strange metallic flower that was swiftly coming

into bloom. And from the center of the Cryptohedron, a brilliant white light shot up to hit the ceiling.

Despite himself, Harry leaned forward to see down into the Cryptohedron.

"Don't!" Hermione said sharply, and he jerked back, giving her an annoyed glare before looking back to the object. Then, he gasped.

Slowly ascending out of the center of the Cryptohedron as if levitated by the stream of light was something new and, in its own way, even more disturbing than the Cryptohedron itself. It was a small thing, no more than a few inches across, and it was mostly transparent as if made of glass. In fact, it looked like a long thin glass tube that somehow wrapped around and fed back into itself in impossible ways. And inside the tube was a small quantity of golden sand that constantly flowed up and down the impossible length of the tube before starting again at the top.

And yet, as small and unassuming as the glass object was, it suddenly filled Harry with a terrible sense of dread. There was no discordant humming. There was no sensation of something coming through the walls. But there *was* a deeply felt awareness that he was looking at something unnatural, something not meant for this world. In that respect, it felt *exactly* like what he'd experienced a year earlier in the memory of Luna Lovegood when he watched as Luna's mother invoked the *Imago Dei*.

It was beautiful.

It was terrifying.

Harry licked his lips as he continued to stare at the tiny impossible glass object.

"Hermione? What am I looking at here?"

Then, he heard a deep sigh from his friend and pulled his eyes off the object toward her. Hermione suddenly looked more relaxed than he had seen her this whole year. Tension seemed to drain away instantly. She looked as though she'd spent months carrying an impossibly heavy burden that *finally* she could lay down. Or at the very least, share with someone else.

"That, my friend," she said almost triumphantly, "is a *Time-Turner!*"

## Chapter End Notes

Next: The Time-Turner

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P\*\*\*\*\*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2 (What the Sinister Man is reading):

"Percy Take the Wheel" by Kitty Smith. A fun little Percy-centric story in which Molly is killed and Arthur put into a coma during the summer before Second Year. And while Bill and Charlie are both out working to make money to keep the family afloat, it falls to a still-grieving Percy to act as the head of household for the remaining Weasleys.

Also, "Alexandra Quick and the World Away" by Inverarity has just come to its utterly amazing conclusion! Check it out.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors:

Adam Sitrich, Epwydadlan, EssayOfThoughts (Aich), Flareix, HeidiWolf, Krisni, Kshitiz, LoudHeart, Magica, Mr. Gift, Mr. Yarrow Dread, Prince of Conspiracy, and sad boi enterprises. Thanks guys!

AN4: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 12,721 (top 13 among HP fanfics). Followers: 13,934 (top 11). Favorites: 12,123 (top 33). Communities: 212. Discord followers: Over 2000! Go Team POS!

AN5: I did the best I could to describe the Cryptohedron and the Time-Turner in action. The Time-Turner is a Klein Bottle. The Cryptohedron is a four-dimensional hypercube, and its changing shape is actually its three-dimensional shadow as it rotates.

# Speaking of Time

## Chapter Notes

### SHAMELESS PLUG!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

## ***Chapter 42: Speaking of Time***

### ***Hogwarts***

***28 March 1994, 8:50 a.m.***

***(263 days ago)***

With a sad expression, Hermione Granger exited the Great Hall after a quick breakfast. Tomorrow, she would leave Hogwarts for the Easter Break. And most likely, she would never return. The prospect of starting over again at Ilvermorny in America was frightening, but not as much as the thought of staying in Britain for even one more day than necessary. She just hoped that the Creeveys followed her and Justin's advice, young Finch-Fletchley having already formally rejected his Prince inheritance before transferring to Beauxbatons.

In the foyer outside the Great Hall, the witch paused to look at the memorial. It was a table decorated with moving pictures and a simple banner: "*Gone but not forgotten!*" While looking sadly at the pictures of those she'd lost (and many of those depicted were once her closest friends), she couldn't help but feel a flash of anger for the one friend whose name and image were absent from the tableau.

"*Even in death,*" she thought to herself bitterly, "*the Purebloods still don't want to even think about The Outcast!*"

Suddenly, her reverie was broken by a sharp Stinging Hex to her leg that caused her to drop to one knee and let out a soft expletive. There was laughter from behind her.

"Such language!" sneered Pansy Parkinson. "You should learn to hold your tongue, *Mudblood*, or we might have to wash your mouth out with soap!"

The Slytherin girl laughed cruelly while still pointing her wand at Hermione in a hand that was covered in the long satin glove that went almost all the way to her shoulder. Despite the best efforts of St. Mungo's top Healers, the scars never did heal, and Pansy's disfigurement had only made the bigoted Slytherin grow even more vicious.

Beside her, the other members of her Pureblooded pack also laughed at Hermione's pain: Daphne Greengrass, Tracey Davis, Marietta Edgecombe, Cho Chang, and Lavender Brown. Of those, Lavender at least had the decency to look slightly embarrassed at her involvement. But a nervous laugh was still a laugh, and Lavender's fairly recent decision to ingratiate herself with Pansy was a clear sign of which way House Brown was leaning in the current political crisis.



"Is there a problem here, Miss Parkinson?" came a stern Scottish brogue from further down the hall.

"Not at all, Professor McGonagall," Pansy said with a smug smile.

"Then be off to class with you, young ladies."

Pansy and her gang swiftly departed while Hermione rose unsteadily.

"Are you alright, Miss Granger?"

Hermione took a deep breath and then looked to her teacher with her usual mask of confidence. "I'm fine, Headmistress," she lied.

"I am pleased to hear it." The newly installed Headmistress of Hogwarts moved closer and spoke quietly.

"Miss Granger ... Hermione ...." The older witch trailed off uncertainly. Then, she took a deep breath before continuing with her usual confidence. "I am here to inform you, Miss Granger, that there are some gentlemen from the Ministry here asking to meet with you."

At that news, Hermione went deathly pale and took a step back. "The Ministry?!"

She'd honestly thought that nothing like this would happen before the Summer, and she wondered if she'd be able to make it to the Quidditch pitch and the broom lockers before she was caught. Thank goodness, Fred Weasley had *insisted* that she learn to fly a broom "*just in case*." She still owed her friend (and perhaps *more than friend*, if circumstances had allowed her the luxury of a first romance) for that. Just as she owed Professor Snape for his

secret Occlumency lessons – she wasn't a true Occlumens, but he assured her that she should be able to keep out all but the most powerful Legilimens now.

"Miss Granger! Please calm yourself!" McGonagall did her best to reassure the frightened girl. "While technically from the Ministry, these men are from the Department of Mysteries. And they have come to Hogwarts bearing a letter of introduction from the Headmaster...." She paused with a wince. "That is ... from Albus Dumbledore. I have reviewed it carefully and believe it to be genuine. And according to Albus's letter, they mean you no harm and may do you much good. Will you please meet with them?"

Hermione stared up at the woman she'd come to admire so much. Minerva McGonagall had been her favorite teacher since her first days at Hogwarts. But in the end, could Hermione *really* trust her? But then she realized – given the state of the country, subterfuge would hardly be necessary if Minister Yaxley had chosen her for "*reeducation*."

"Very well, Headmistress," she finally said. "If you think it's for the best."

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### ***Moments later ...***

The Headmistress led Hermione into the small rarely used classroom but did not follow her in. Inside the room, the young Gryffindor was met by two adult wizards, the elder of whom looked vaguely familiar. They were standing on the other side of a round table upon which sat a large cube-shaped object covered by a thick cloth. Once the door closed behind her, the two wizards enacted several privacy

Charms, most of which she did not recognize. Only then did they seem to relax. The older man spoke first.

"Now that that's done, allow me to introduce myself. I am Saul Croaker, the Public Relations Officer for the Department of Mysteries. Also known colloquially, if a bit overdramatically, as the Voice of the Unspeakables. My associate here ... well, for purposes of today's meeting, you may address him as Seventeen."

Hermione nodded but said nothing.

"Before we proceed," said Seventeen. "We have a few preliminary questions. First, you are Hermione Jean Granger, a Third Year Muggleborn Sorted into Gryffindor in 1991?"

"Yes."

"And you are also the daughter of Dan and Emma Granger, who reside in Crawley and work in London as dentists?"

"I am," she said quietly.

"And were you born on September 19, 1979 at 2:47 p.m. which makes you a Virgo?"

The question about her Zodiac sign was a bit unexpected. "Y-yes."

Seventeen looked at Croaker, who nodded. Then, they reached towards the covered object on the table, with each of them grabbing a corner of the cloth before yanking it away. Underneath was a solid cube completely covered in a chrome-like metal with an obvious button on the top.

"Have you ever seen this object before, Miss Granger?"

She looked up in confusion. "No, I haven't. What is it?"

The two men looked at one another almost nervously.

"Miss Granger," said Croaker. "Would you ... would you please press the button in the center of the cube for us?"

Hermione looked at the man suspiciously. She knew Saul Croaker was the man who had planned to snatch Luna Lovegood away from her mother and draft her into government service at the age of *seven* before Pandora Lovegood intervened with literally world-altering magic. It did not leave her with a positive impression of the Unspeakable. And yet, there was a strange and terrible earnestness to his expression, as though he *needed* her to press the button for her own sake as much as his, and perhaps for the sake of many others besides them. Despite her misgivings, she reached out and pressed the button.

The cube floated up into the air and went through a dazzling array of shape changes before finally returning to its original cube-shape. Then, it floated back down before dividing itself into hundreds of much smaller cubes which then unfurled away from the central mass like a blossoming flower. A shaft of light shot up to the ceiling, and then, after a few seconds, a tiny object floated up until it was eye-level with Hermione. It was oddly shaped, a glass tube that twisted and turned back in on itself, frequently in ways that seemed to defy Euclidean geometry.

Hermione's eyes widened. "Is that ... a Klein bottle?"

The two Unspeakables were startled. Apparently, neither of them had expected the girl to have any useful information about the object at all, let alone information they did not already know.

"What is a Klein bottle, Miss Granger?"

She grimaced. "I'm not sure I can *explain* it, Mr. ... Seventeen. I saw a Muggle science program once that talked about it. It's a curved object that only has one surface because it folds back inside itself. Sort of like the bottle equivalent of a Moebius strip."

The wizards' expressions indicated they didn't know what a Moebius strip was either. She ignored their dumbfounded expressions and continued.

"I don't fully understand the maths or geometry involved, but as I recall, a *true* Klein bottle can only exist in the Fourth Dimension, though you can imitate it as a three-dimensional object."

"But ... this is extraordinary!" said Seventeen excitedly. "Tell us more!"

"Seventeen!" Croaker snapped. "We're on a schedule!"

"But ... she *recognizes its shape!* The idea that Muggle science might actually *know* something about it, more than we do anyway, is ...."

"Seventeen!" Croaker interrupted before speaking more gently. "It *doesn't matter*, Seventeen. You know it doesn't because in a few minutes *this conversation won't have happened!*"

Seventeen deflated at that news. "Yes ... yes, of course," he said dejectedly. Hermione watched all this with obvious confusion.

"So, um, what *is* this thing supposed to be? And why did you need me to open the ... box thingy?"

"Miss Granger, the '*box-thingy*' is called the Cryptohedron. It has been in the possession of the Unspeakables for as long as our order has existed, and it was in the possession of the mystagogues of the pre-Roman druids for far longer than that. Its true origin is unknown and unknowable. But its *purpose* is to identify the one person who can open it and direct us to that person at the appointed time so that it can *be* opened and its contents released."

He then gestured towards the small Klein bottle floating in mid-air. "And *that*, Miss Granger, has many names, but we usually refer to it as ... the *Time-Turner*!"

At that, Hermione actually laughed. "*Time-Turner*?! But that's just a myth!"

"Not a myth, Miss Granger," said Seventeen. "More of a misdirection. You see, the Unspeakables have spread the idea of a Time-Turner that would allow physical travel back through time. We even spread the absurd rumor that Time-Turners were sometimes loaned out to gifted Hogwarts students so that they could take extra classes. A nonsensical idea, I'm sure you agree."

"Wait a minute," Hermione interrupted. "Do you mean to say that time travel *is* possible? But what about the Fifth Principal Exception to Gamp's Law?!"

The two Unspeakables looked at one another again and smiled. The fact that the Third Year was already knowledgeable enough to reference Gamp's Law was a good sign. It meant they wouldn't have to explain *everything*.

"The Fifth Exception holds true, Miss Granger," said Seventeen. "Physical time travel *is* impossible because such magic would require whatever was transported, whether

living or inanimate, to either exist simultaneously with a duplicate of itself or else to exist at a time before its own creation. The Fifth Exception tells us that something that is *real* rather than *conjured* can only exist in the physical world from the moment of its creation to the moment of its destruction and cannot co-exist with itself. *Copies* fashioned of raw magic can be forged with Charms such as Gemino Charm or the Doppelganger Defense Charm, and such copies may last for quite a long time if cast well enough. But an actual person or thing can neither be truly co-located nor exist at any point prior to its own existence."

"Move along, Seventeen!" Croaker said through gritted teeth.

"Sorry, sorry." Seventeen looked embarrassed to have wandered off into a lecture. "Well anyway, it turns out that there is an exception to the exception. You see, the *soul*, once it has been separated from its physical vessel, has no material component to upset the system of magical balances governed by Gamp's Law. This characteristic is what allows for phenomena such as Horcruxes...!"

"*Seventeen!*" Croaker snapped angrily. Seventeen coughed and then blushed nervously.

"Er, yes. Forget I mentioned that, please. But anyway, it turns out that if an intact and undivided soul is removed from the body and deprived of all physical and metaphysical connections to this world, it is possible to send it back to any earlier point within the span of its own existence to then merge with the soul of its past self. The result would be that the earlier version of the person would instantly obtain all the knowledge and experience of the older version and with it, the ability to make changes to future history!"

Hermione stared at the man as if he were mad. "Change ... history?! But that's impossible! It would cause a paradox! If you change history in the past, the future you came from would be different and then the future-you *wouldn't have a reason* to go back and change the past!"

Both men blinked at her in surprise. "Bledsoe's Paradox!" Seventeen exclaimed delightedly. "Where in blazes did you hear about that concept?"

"Muggles call it the Grandfather Paradox," she said before continuing in mild embarrassment. "I heard about it ... well, on *Doctor Who*, I think."

"Well, I don't know anything about Muggle medicine, Miss Granger," said Croaker. "But that's not an issue with the Time-Turner. All our available research into this artifact leads us to believe that it will *not* cause a paradox. After the user's soul has been sent back in time, our reality will alter as needed to accommodate the changes the user introduces in the past."

"Impossible!" Hermione sputtered. "Absolutely impossible! I cannot believe that the Unspeakables or any other group of wizards has functioning time travel. It can't be. The world would simply look nothing like it does if you could go off willy-nilly into the past whenever you wanted to *change things*. And *especially* not to satisfy the dictates of some government conspiracy!"

"Well, that's the thing, Miss Granger," said Seventeen reassuringly. "We can't use it, as you put it, *willy-nilly*. The Time-Turner allows for time travel and is the only thing known to us that does. *But* it is *the Cryptohedron* that determines when it can be used and by whom. And it only does so when it has predicted an imminent disaster, usually



one that will result in catastrophic loss of human life, but which is of a character such that it could be averted if a *particular person* in the recent past were given advance knowledge of the future! Until the Cryptohedron opens at the touch of its chosen user, who is the only person who *can* open it, the Time-Turner is completely inaccessible because, metaphysically speaking, its container doesn't fully exist in our universe until the user summons it. And that user, in this instance, is *you*, Miss Granger!"

The girl looked at the two men as if they were utterly insane. "*I'M FOURTEEN! I HAVEN'T EVEN FINISHED MY THIRD YEAR AT HOGWARTS! HOW ON EARTH DID I GET PICKED FOR THIS?!*"

"Calm down, Miss Granger," Croaker said reassuringly. "I freely admit – you are not the sort of candidate we Unspeakables would have chosen to save the world had we had our druthers. But the Cryptohedron does not choose the most powerful candidate nor the wisest one. It chooses the person who, at the appointed moment in the past, *would have been the right person in the right place to affect the needed changes if only they had known what was coming*. And since you were, in fact, able to activate the Cryptohedron and release the Time-Turner, that person in this instance is you."

Hermione was speechless, so Seventeen continued.

"I suppose some background might assuage your fears. This device has been in the possession of the Department of Mysteries ever since the conquest of Britain by the Roman wizards who invaded these lands in the 5th Century. Indeed, it was in part *because* of this device that the Romans won. You see, the outcome of the conflict was in serious doubt, and it seemed possible that the Romans and

the indigenous wizards might destroy each other in a magical war. But the the druid mystagogues were afraid that the ancient artifacts they guarded would be destroyed or that knowledge of how to use them would be lost, with potentially disastrous results for the whole world. And so, they *betrayed their own people* to the invaders in exchange for a promise that our ancestors would set ourselves to preserving and defending their secrets, secrets which they claimed had been passed down since the fall of Avalon – their name for fabled Atlantis!"

Hermione's dubiousness only grew at the mention of "fabled Atlantis," but she held her tongue.

Croaker continued the story. "In the fifteen or so centuries since then, the body of wizards which became known as the Department of Mysteries fulfilled our tasks faithfully. The Cryptohedron activated on average once or twice a century, and we always delivered it and the Time-Turner to the individual chosen. Only once did we fail to do so. In 1924, the Cryptohedron identified as its chosen user a dark witch named Jocasta Flint who, by that point, was serving a life sentence in Azkaban for some of the most horrific abuses of magic the world had seen since the fall of the Dark Lord Ekrizdis. For the first time, we Unspeakables balked at honoring our vow to our druid predecessors.

*"Surely this is a mistake, we said. Surely, we cannot be meant to deliver the power of time travel to a Dark Lady who was only defeated by good fortune before she could unleash devastation across Europe.* The matter was put to a vote by our governing council, and after much heated debate, the Unspeakables decided by a margin of 4-3 *not* to deliver the Cryptohedron to Jocasta Flint."

A wave of shame and regret passed over the old man's face.

"It was not until years later that we finally understood the magnitude of our folly, a miscalculation that led to the deaths of *millions*. You see, Jocasta Flint was captured and brought to justice through the actions of a brave French Auror who went undercover within her organization and secretly spied on her for the ICW. *But she never knew that*. Flint went to her grave utterly convinced that the person who betrayed her was actually her chief lieutenant and apprentice – *Gellert Grindelwald!*"

Hermione gasped, and Croaker nodded.

"Yes, *that* Grindelwald. Had we delivered the Time-Turner to Flint – had we just *fulfilled our oaths and done our jobs!* – she would have traveled back in time and immediately slain Grindelwald as a traitor *before* he could come into his power ... and then, she *still* would have been betrayed and brought down by the spy she never knew about!

"So *no*, Miss Granger, you are hardly the most unlikely candidate for this job."

"In fact," Seventeen added, "compared to most of the recorded users, your recent life history makes you uniquely suited for this role. After all, all our current problems started with the Azkaban break-out followed by what happened to the Boy-Who-Lived. You were actually *on the train* when that happened, weren't you?"

Hermione nodded. "You mean ... I could use this to save Jim and ... the others?"

"I believe so," Seventeen said. "Mind you, we cannot say for certain. You won't have carte blanche in the past, after all. From what we know from interviews with past time travelers, the Time-Turner itself will act as a governor on your actions. Some events will *have to happen* in order to

achieve a positive outcome in the future, and the Time-Turner can and will influence you against interfering. Thus, we cannot guarantee that the death of Jim Potter, or any of your other friends and associates who you somehow lost recently, are not events that are essential to the proper flow of history. You will have a sense of what you can and can't do. And in extreme cases involving events that *must* take place, the Time-Turner may even be able to physically prevent you from acting, though our records of what that means are, well, *vague and spotty*, I'm afraid. On the bright side, it will also occasionally encourage you to do seemingly innocuous things, and only much later will you understand how those actions benefited both you and the timeline. Beyond that, however, I regret to say we can give you little guidance."

Hermione looked back to the Time-Turner itself. She could feel its unnatural power calling to her. As absurd as this whole thing seemed, she could also feel a disturbing sense of *rightness*, as though she truly was *meant* for this.

"Why did you ask me if I had seen this before?" she asked.

"You asked about paradoxes," Croaker said. "We believe the Cryptohedron itself is what prevents such temporal anomalies by somehow preserving the time stream against catastrophic disruption, though its mechanisms for doing so are incomprehensible to us. It first alerted us to an imminent activation last July, with regular follow-up warnings that let us refine our search for the intended user. When you go back into the past, the Cryptohedron will *still* activate itself at the appointed time and progress through the same process of activation until finally, it brings us to meet with you again here and now in the new timeline. At that point, we – for some value of '*us*' – will be here to meet with you again. By longstanding tradition laid

down by the druids, we will confirm your identity and then reveal the Cryptohedron to you again."

"At that point, Miss Granger," continued Seventeen, "you will advise us that you *have* seen it before and *used* it successfully before restoring the Time-Turner to its container. We will not fully debrief you as our records *strongly* discourage us from trying to find out too much about the device's inner workings. But we will likely ask that you provide at least a thumbnail sketch for our records of the nature of the disaster that led to the Cryptohedron's activation." Seventeen coughed into his hand.

"And on a personal note, if I am here to meet with you again at that time, I should be very grateful if you would mention the phrases '*Klein bottle*' and '*Doctor Who*' as potential areas of study."

"Seventeen...!" Croaker said warningly.

"Alright, alright! Anyway, once you have returned the Time-Turner to the Cryptohedron and closed it, we will return it to the Department of Mysteries for safe keeping. At that point, your role in this affair will be over."

Hermione had gone back to staring at the Time-Turner almost as if hypnotized by it.

"What if I say no?" she asked. The two men looked at one another nervously. "Has that ever happened before?"

"... yes," said Croaker. "The Cryptohedron has been activated on thirty-seven documented occasions over the last 2500 years. Excluding the Jocasta Flint incident, three identified users have ... declined to use the Time-Turner." He swallowed. "And in each case, the resulting death toll

over the course of the following years ranged from a minimum of just under a hundred-thousand people to ... several million."

She nodded slowly. "And what is the disaster I'm going back to prevent? I certainly agree that Wizarding Britain needs some changes, but I hardly see how a fourteen-year-old Mudblood girl is going to defeat the forces of entrenched bigotry by herself."

Croaker grimaced at the girl's bluntness. "A valid concern, I suppose. The truth, Miss Granger, is that I'm afraid the nature of the disaster is more ... *concrete* than merely a steep rise in anti-Muggleborn sentiment. Based on our internal analysis, within the next six months, one of the following three scenarios will inevitably occur. In Scenario 1, the political alliance that presently controls the Wizengamot successfully resurrects You-Know-Who and then immediately turns the entire government over to him, with the end result being a global magical war by the end of the year."

Hermione gaped.

"In Scenario 2, that alliance's efforts to resurrect You-Know-Who will fail but have the unintended side effect of freeing the Dementors of Azkaban – which presently number several *thousand* – to ravage Britain and Europe."

The girl put her hands on the table as if to steady herself. "And Scenario 3?"

"You-Know-Who is resurrected ... and he gains *control* over those thousands of Dementors which then break free of Azkaban to serve as his army!"

The room was silent for a moment.

"What do I do to activate this ... Time-Turner?" the Gryffindor finally asked.

"Nothing, really," said Seventeen. "You just reach out ... and *take it*."

And so, she did.

And then, in a blaze of Wild Magic, Hermione Granger's body was vaporized. But her soul carried on.

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***The Zabini Villa, Florence, Italy***  
***9 July 1993, 3:30 a.m.***  
***(262 days ago)***

Hermione shot up in her bed gasping for air as if she'd awoken from a terrible nightmare. She whispered the word *Lumos* and in response the bedside lamp came on, softly illuminating her room. She studied the bedroom for several seconds as if to remind herself of where she was. Then, she rose and went to the en suite bathroom to splash some cold water on her face. She looked up at her reflection in the mirror and stared at it silently for a long time.

Then, the witch returned to the bedroom and sat down at her writing desk. Pulling out a notebook and pen, she turned to a clean page and made a "to do" list for herself. Once complete, she opened her Charms textbook and began taking notes.

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***Hogwarts***  
***28 March 1994, 9:00 a.m.***  
***(20 minutes ago)***

The Deputy-Headmistress led Hermione into the classroom that had been claimed by the Goldstein Group for their experiments but did not follow her in. Inside the room, the young Gryffindor was met by two adult wizards, both of whom she recognized. They were standing on the other side of the same round table she'd been working with for months, upon which sat a large cube-shaped object covered by a thick cloth. Once the door closed behind her, the two wizards enacted several privacy Charms, most of which she'd been able to track down and master over the last few months. Only then did they seem to relax. The older man spoke first.

"Now that that's done, allow me to introduce myself. I am Saul Croaker, the Public Relations Officer for the Department of Mysteries. Also known colloquially, if a bit overdramatically, as the Voice of the Unspeakables. My associate here ... well, for purposes of today's meeting, you may address him as Number Seventeen."

Hermione nodded but said nothing.

"Before we proceed," said Seventeen. "We have a few preliminary questions. First, you are Hermione Jean Granger, a Third Year Muggleborn Sorted into Gryffindor in 1991?"

"Yes."

"And you are also the daughter of Dan and Emma Granger, who reside in Crawley and work in London as dentists?"

"I am," she said calmly.

"And were you born on September 19, 1979 at 2:47 p.m. and a Virgo?"



This time, the question about her Zodiac sign was completely expected. "Yes."

Seventeen looked at Croaker, who nodded. Then, they reached towards the covered object on the table, with each of them grabbing a corner of the cloth. But they had barely pulled the cloth away from the object enough to expose the chrome cube underneath when Hermione unexpectedly yelled out: **"MORPHEUS!"**

There was a flash of light from the table, and both Unspeakables instantly fell to the ground unconscious. Hermione quickly took their wands just to be on the safe side. Only then, did she press the button on the top of the Cryptohedron to reopen it. When it was fully blossomed, she placed her hand in the resulting light stream, and the Time-Turner reappeared and slowly lowered itself down into the depths of the Cryptohedron. But before the unearthly container could close once more, she reached inside and pressed a tiny recessed button that caused the Cryptohedron to freeze and the column of light to wink out.

Then, the girl reached into her bookbag, and from it, she withdrew the horoscope that (on sheer impulse!) she cast for Harry Potter two days earlier. Inside the depths of the dormant Cryptohedron, she could see dials and buttons that she recognized from Professor Trelawney's descriptions of various famous astrological orreries of antiquity. Ancient mechanical constructs created by forgotten if not mythical civilizations that allowed one to manipulate astrological information in order to improve divinations.

And apparently, it seemed, for even more obscure purposes.

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## Hogwarts

**28 March 1994, 9:20 a.m.**

**(Now)**

"Time travel," Harry said in a tone that implied he either thought Hermione had gone mad or that he himself was having some sort of breakdown.

"Yes," Hermione said placidly.

"So ... you're from ... the future."

"Yes. Well, no. Not anymore, I mean. I traveled from about five minutes ago in a different timeline to a specific moment in July of last year. I've basically lived through the last seven-and-a-half months twice, though it was different each time."

By this point, Harry had his eyes closed and was rubbing his forehead with his fingers. "This is ... impossible."

"Harry," Hermione said patiently. "Look at that twisted, warped four-dimensional hour-glass thing floating in the air in front of you and tell me again about something being *impossible*."

He looked over to the witch in consternation, but to do so, he had to look past the Time-Turner itself. And it did indeed look (and *feel*) like something utterly impossible.

"Wait a minute," Harry said suddenly. "You've been here since last July and have been using advance knowledge of the future to change things around." He suddenly looked at her with grave suspicion. "Did any of your *changes* play any role in what just happened over the last day or so?"

The witch suddenly seemed apologetic. "Well, only in the broadest sense ...."

"What?! What does *that* mean?! Did your time travel cause any of last night's mess? Yes or no?!"

"Harry," she began, but the boy cut her off.

"No, Hermione! I watched a friend *die* last night and then had to *kill* another friend in self-defense! And *then*, my own father hit me with the Ultimate Sanction that will make me one of the most hated people in Britain! Now, I want to know - was any of that because of *you*!"

Hermione crossed her arms and returned his glare. "Only in the sense that *this time* you were actually still around so that those things *could* happen to you!" she snapped.

Harry opened his mouth for an angry retort, but then, he grasped the significance of his friend's words. The reply froze in his throat, and he slowly closed his mouth as his eyes widened. Then, he raised a finger for emphasis and started to speak again, only to close his mouth a second time. Finally, he took a deep calming breath and was at last collected enough to speak.

"Hermione," he said with remarkable calmness.

"What *exactly* have you been doing since last July?"

She huffed loudly. "Well, in the original timeline...." Then, it was her turn to stop in mid-sentence. She closed her eyes and softly muttered "*No. Sloppy thinking.*" She opened her eyes and tried again.

"In my own personal timeline as it existed before my use of the Time-Turner, Blaise Zabini was murdered by a relative in an inheritance dispute last July. On September 1st, you

and Jim were both Kissed by a Dementor on the way to Hogwarts. Classes were cancelled for the first few days of school to allow students a chance to grieve, but when they resumed, Pansy Parkinson insulted a Hippogriff and had most of her arm torn off. This led to Buckbeak getting executed and Hagrid being sent to Azkaban on a three-year sentence for '*recklessly endangering the life of a Wizengamot Heir*.' On Halloween, werewolves and Death Eaters still attacked Hogsmeade, but this time, Ted and Nymphadora Tonks both died along with the house elf Iris, and Theo only narrowly escaped. Nearly a dozen other Hogsmeade citizens were also killed in that attack, and scores of others were seriously injured. Amy Wilkes was also kidnapped by Fenrir Greyback that day and was never seen or heard from again. Finally, later that night, Theo No-Name, depressed over the loss of so many friends and by rejection from most of the school, killed himself by jumping from the top of the Astronomy Tower."

She paused to take a breath.

"After that, things got *really* bad!"

At that, Harry literally stepped back in shock. "All ... all those people dead or hurt or Kissed or whatever ... and *then* things got really bad?!"

The witch nodded. "As a result of all the scandals that seemed to take place under his watch, Professor Dumbledore was forced out as Headmaster and also stripped of his Chief Warlock position, while Minister Fudge fell to a No Confidence vote. In the ensuing political vacuum, a new power bloc emerged in the Wizengamot. An alliance of House Selwyn, House Nott (now supported by all of Lucius Malfoy's former vassals) ... and *House Potter under the Regency of Peter Pettigrew!* You see, after you

and Jim were Kissed, your father had a complete mental breakdown and had to be committed to St. Mungo's, while your mother was overcome by grief and went into seclusion."

She stopped to think for a moment. "Although, now that I know Pettigrew is a Death Eater, both of those outcomes suddenly seem a lot more sinister. But regardless, Pettigrew did show up with papers signed by your father that gave him Regent status in such circumstances, a status he would have held for as long as you and/or Jim lived even in a comatose state. Of course, it didn't help the political situation that over the Christmas Break, Neville and his grandmother simply disappeared altogether while Lucius Malfoy abruptly sold all his British assets and emigrated to Brazil.

"Anyway, the new bloc got a man named Corban Yaxley chosen as Minister and a horrible old fiend named Merihem Selwyn appointed as Chief Warlock. By the end of February, they had successfully blamed everything that had happened, from the Azkaban breakout to all the deaths at Hogsmeade, on '*radical Muggleborn insurrectionists trying to stoke fear by posing as Death Eaters*,' and they passed a whole raft of anti-Muggleborn laws!"

"How bad did it get?" Harry asked cautiously.

"I'll put it to you this way," Hermione replied. "I was preparing to *flee Britain* and emigrate to America with my parents when the option of escaping back through time presented itself instead. Dozens of convicted Death Eaters were released from Azkaban based on '*new evidence*' while dozens of prominent Muggleborns were sent *to* Azkaban on incredibly flimsy claims that they were somehow involved in the original breakout! Oh, and by the time I left, it had

already been announced that starting in the Fall of 1994, Muggleborns would no longer attend Hogwarts but would instead be enrolled in a special *remedial school* year-round to prepare us for our *proper place* in Wizarding society!"

She paused to catch her breath. "And best of all, when the Unspeakables came to deliver the Cryptohedron to me, they speculated that everything that had happened to that point was only a prelude to Voldemort's imminent return. That or a Dementor apocalypse. Or a Voldemort/Dementor joint apocalypse."

Harry stared at his friend dumbly. "Hermione, could you summon a chair for me? I don't feel up to it, but I really need to sit down."

She gave him a wan smile, and with a flick of her wand, one of the chairs against the wall slid over to him. He sat down slowly.

"Okay, so you went back in time to ... save us all. Thanks for that ... I guess." Then, he blinked repeatedly. "Hey, waitaminute! *You* didn't save me from the Dementor! Neville did!"

Hermione summoned her own chair and sat down. "True, but I made a big scene in our compartment about going to investigate things, so naturally, chivalrous-to-a-fault Neville followed along. If he hadn't, my backup plan was to find one of the upper-year students who knew the Patronus Charm and manipulate them into coming along. I knew from the beginning that Dementors would be at Hogwarts, so over the summer, I asked around to find out which students could cast the spell besides Neville. Happily, Neville did come along, so that part wasn't necessary.

"I found out very quickly that changing the past seldom required grand gestures. It was more about little things that felt like a good idea at the time and also making casual suggestions to people who could change things more effectively than I. For example, I didn't really do anything to save Ted and Nymphadora Tonks, either, but I knew I had to be present at the scene somehow. Ron told me that he was interested in becoming a Healer, so I talked him into coming along so he could ask Ted questions about subject just so I'd have a pretext for being there. Then, when the attack happened, *he* ended up being the one to save Ted!"

"And Nymphadora?"

"I'm pretty sure that it was indirectly because of *you*. Of course, you were the one to save Amy Wilkes. But the first time through those events, neither Alastor Moody nor Malachi Sturgeon were present in Hogsmeade on the day of the attack. Sturgeon wasn't even in Britain by that point. I gather he was Jim's martial arts instructor back in Shamballa, and after Jim was Kissed, he returned to the Far East only a week or so later. In the second run-through, you and Jim still had your souls, so Alastor Moody was in Hogsmeade that day to meet with you, and he physically prevented Nymphadora Tonks from running into the clinic to her death. Meanwhile Mr. Sturgeon was still at Hogwarts for Jim, and so he was on hand to summon Aurors from London and to fight against the werewolves. Also, your mother and father were both in Hogsmeade that day, and they also saved many lives."

Harry considered her words. "You were very resistant to the idea that Pansy owed you a life debt. Was that because she didn't die before?"

"Yes, I was pretty sure that if I'd done nothing, she'd have only been seriously wounded. I was actually more concerned with saving Hagrid than Pansy. Though the fiction that she might have owed me a life debt paid off later."

"How so?"

She grinned. "I used it to blackmail Lord Parkinson into remaining a vassal of Lucius Malfoy's for the next several years. Without Parkinson's votes, Pettigrew's bloc wouldn't have enough votes to pull off their coup."

Harry looked around the room in amazement. "Is this why you really joined Anthony's group? Or did you just happen to spend months carving a Stunner-based rune trap onto a table in the room where you would eventually meet up with the Unspeakables again?"

Hermione shrugged. "Honestly, I had *no idea* why I felt such a strong impulse to join Anthony's group. I knew, of course, that the room Anthony had already chosen for his experiments was the same room in which I'd previously opened the Cryptohedron. And the first time through, I joined the Goldstein Group because you and Blaise were — well, you know — so I was already familiar with Anthony's project. But until last night, it had honestly never occurred to me that I could use it to, how did you put it? *Mug* the Unspeakables and seize control of the Cryptohedron!

"Oh, and since you asked me repeatedly about that book about magic interfering with Muggle technology, the truth is that I'd never even read it in the prior timeline. Anthony found it and mentioned to me that magic interfered with plastics and electricity, but he didn't mention the name of



the book it was in. I remembered the information but had no idea where it came from.

"Similarly, I had no idea all this time why I felt compelled to stay in Divination – or as I like to call it, *Advanced Charlatanism*. Originally, I dropped it after the first session after concluding that Professor Trelawney was a fraud who just did cold readings fairly well. But then, I ended up casting your horoscope earlier this week, and I realized I could use it to reprogram the Cryptohedron to identify you as the next chosen user."

Harry paled and looked up at the floating Time-Turner with trepidation. "You want *me* to go back in time?!"

"Naturally! I was sent back to undo the disasters that led to a fascist Pureblood takeover of Britain. By a remarkable chain of events, my work comes to an end just in time for *another* disaster to arise that my best friend is uniquely qualified to undo if only he can be sent back even a few days."

"And you don't see any dangers with arbitrarily deciding to do this?"

"Nope!" she said confidently. "Mainly because the Time-Turner itself never gave me any sense it was opposed! Just as it can nudge the user to perform seemingly pointless actions that only pay off in the future, it can also discourage the user from doing things that would be detrimental for the mission."

"What do you mean?" Harry inquired.

"Well, for starters, when I arrived last July, I assumed that the simplest and most direct way to change things would be

just to let the Ministry know about the Azkaban breakout ahead of time."

Harry had sudden coughing fit in response to that comment, but the girl ignored it.

"Unfortunately, it wasn't that easy. Random events continually distracted me from contacting the Ministry and even forgetting the idea completely. When I finally found a *stack* of letters to the Azkaban Warden that I'd written and then stuffed in a drawer in my bedroom and forgotten about, I gave up and decided that the breakout itself was just *something that had to happen*."

She grew thoughtful for a moment while Harry marveled at the idea that Fate itself wanted the Azkaban breakout to occur.

"On a less dramatic note, I also developed a powerful aversion to sweets. I assumed it was because in the last timeline, I had three cavities over Christmas due to all the chocolate I ate at Hogwarts. This year, I had a clean bill of health instead. But then, it also led me to *not* eat any of the poisoned cake at the SPAM meeting the other night, and as a result, I was able to get everyone to the Infirmary before anyone was seriously hurt, a connection I didn't even make until well after the fact."

Harry looked at the Time-Turner suspiciously. "It must have been infuriating to have been driven by impulses you didn't understand." Oddly, the idea made him think of his own issues of advanced vocabulary and his Oscar Wilde fixation.

"Oh, you have *no idea*, Harry. Here's another example. The Time-Turner and the Cryptohedron have both been in the possession of the Unspeakables for the better part of 2,500

years. It was in the possession of the druid mystagogues for at least 4,000 years before that."

She also looked up to the Time-Turner almost angrily.

"And yet ... and *yet*, I am somehow absolutely certain that neither the Time-Turner nor the Cryptohedron have been created yet."

Harry looked at her google-eyed. "*What?!*"

"What I said! The Time-Turner and its container will be created at some point in the future and then sent back to the distant past where it will influence the timeline until it inevitably comes into our possession! I have no idea how I know that, Harry, but I'm *certain* it's true! It's *maddening*, and I am *eager* to be done with it! From now on, I only want to know things that I've actually *learned* somehow!"

There was a groan from Unspeakable Seventeen.

"Any more questions, Harry? I can stun them both again if we need more time, but we don't have all day."

Harry rose from the chair. "I don't think so. But if I do later, can I talk to you ... *past you*, I mean?"

"Maybe. Come and find me when you can. If you have a strong instinct that you can reveal the truth to me, do so. If you have a strong aversion to doing so, then don't. But I will leave you with a few final bits of advice: You may be able to save everyone you care about, but not necessarily. I couldn't save Iris or the Auror who died in the Hogsmeade attack, even though I knew they'd died the first time. Oh, and *be prepared* for events to spin out of your actions in unpredictable directions, because changing the future can

affect your life in unexpected ways. And perhaps cost you things you weren't expecting to lose."

"Like what?"

The witch looked pensive. "In this timeline, I'm casual friends with Fred Weasley at most. Before I came back, we'd been dating for almost a month." Then, she looked downright distraught. "More importantly ... my parents are getting divorced, and I'm pretty sure it's because of the changes I made."

Harry looked at her sadly. "The last time we talked about your parents, you were ... a bit ambivalent about them."

She scoffed. "The last time we talked about my parents, I'd just turned thirteen and I was a moody, angst-ridden teenager angry that my parents just didn't understand me. Since then, almost two years have passed for me, and half that time was spent in a dystopian timeline where my parents made it clear how much they loved me and supported me, to the point of being perfectly willing to flee the country and start over in America. But now, there's no dystopian timeline. Just a daughter who's been evasive and secretive about everything she's been doing in the Wizarding World. Any estrangement between us is my fault."

"Hermione ...." Harry didn't know what to say. In many ways, he'd been almost jealous of Hermione's relationship with her parents, even though they both had disliked him due to his mysterious condition. He had no words to comfort her in this instance.

"It's alright, Harry. If that's the price I pay to save my friends and the world, so be it. But just be aware – Fate may

demand a price from *you* in exchange for saving the people you care about."

Harry nodded solemnly. "Any other bits of advice?"

"Yes. When you get back, start off by making a to-do list," she said with a smirk. "Proper planning prevents poor performance, as they say."

Both Unspeakables were beginning to stir now.

"It's time," Hermione said. Then she smiled. "No pun intended."

Harry chuckled, but his expression grew serious as he studied the Time-Turner. "So what do I do?"

"Just grab the Time-Turner, Harry, and it will do the rest. Good luck!"

The boy rose and reached out for the strange twisted hourglass that Hermione called a Time-Turner, but at the last second, he hesitated at the enormity of what he was considering. To rewrite Time itself.

But then, he pictured Marcus Flint dying for no reason save a gesture of cruel contempt from Wormtail. He imagined Remus Lupin's kindly face followed by the image of his lupine form ripped apart by Harry's Parselmagic. He thought about Regulus Black's last words and the tears that flowed down Sirius's cheeks as he consigned his brother to the heavens.

*"I'm going to save you,"* he thought furiously. *"Whatever the cost, I'm going to save you all!"*

Harry grabbed the Time-Turner and then felt its magic rip his body apart at the atomic level before sending his soul back on its journey.

## Chapter End Notes

Next: Redux!

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P\*\*\*\*\*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2 (What the Sinister Man is reading): Nothing new, atm.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors:

Adam Sitrich, Anne-athema Codex, Antony444, blowback123, BlueWater5, larix, Fredif, jobber, kami, Luc, Magica, mmailiw, and Pokeflute. Thanks guys!

AN4: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 12,853 (top 13 among HP fanfics). Followers: 13,988 (top 11). Favorites: 12,178 (top 33). Communities: 213. Discord followers: Over 2000! Go Team POS!

AN5: So, the Time-Turner. Regular followers of POS probably know that I'm a big fan of "Oh God Not Again" by Sarah1281, in which an adult Harry Potter is cast back in time to relive his school days and try to make things better. While OGNA is played as a broad comedy, this genre of fanfic (known as a "redo fic" or sometimes

as a Peggy Sue fic after the film "Peggy Sue Got Married" in which an unhappy wife is sent back to her high school days with full knowledge of all her future regrets) is fairly common in HP fandom due to the presence of magic in general and Time-Turners in particular. I think the Ur-example is "Nightmares of Future Past" by S'TarKan, though "Sisyphus" by esama is the actual nightmare version. There are scads of them, mostly involving Harry, but sometimes Snape or Ron or somebody else will travel back in time. Another amusing example is "Far Too Many Time Travelers" by Lord Jeram, in which a dozen people (so far) have all time traveled back to Harry's first year from different, mutually exclusive futures, much to the chagrin of little Harry who is not a time traveler and has no idea why everyone is acting so weird.

Anyway, as I was storyboarding DEM, I originally planned to leave out the Time-Turner because, as depicted in canon, it's just ridiculous. But then, I realized that if there's no Time-Turner plot and no Buckbeak plot (because Draco's gone) and no Ron-Hermione feud (because Scabbers isn't around to not get eaten by Crookshanks), then there's absolutely nothing for Hermione to do.

Coincidentally, around that time, I discovered "Potter Ever After" by Kevin3, a delightful little series of short stories that deconstructs some of the plot holes and overdone tropes common in HP fics, and one chapter in it that parodies redo fics (a) lampshades how boring it can be when the protagonist in a redo fic is basically playing through a rerun of his life but on God-Mode and (b) suggests that it would be much more interesting if someone other than the protagonist were a time

traveler working secretly in the background to avert some future catastrophe.

And so, here we are. It turns out Hermione did have a Time-Turner after all – which she used to travel to July 1993 in order to avert a future disaster completely unrelated to the main plot because in her timeline, Harry, Jim, Blaise, Theo and many others are all dead or otherwise lost. And even better, she achieved most of her objectives by November 1993 and has spent the time since basically puttering around at the edges of history while waiting for the Unspeakables to bring the Cryptohedron back to her.



# Redux (Part 1)

## Chapter Notes

### SHAMELESS PLUG!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### ***Harry Potter and the Death Eater Menace***

***Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.***

### ***Chapter 43: Redux (Part 1)***

***26 March 1994, 5:45 a.m.  
Harry's Room***

Harry Potter's eyes shot open and he sat up in bed. He'd had a strange unsettling dream that he could not recall any of upon awakening. Not exactly a nightmare, just ... weird. A dream he couldn't recall at all yet somehow knew he'd

had before. Déjà vu of the unconscious, as it were. His watch said that it was quarter to 6, so he wasn't up much earlier than usual. The Slytherin gathered his toiletries and then *stopped*, as the strange sense of déjà vu only grew more intense. Cautiously, he moved over to the door and pulled it open. As he had somehow expected, Blaise was on the other side of the door, startled by Harry's presence.

"What's got you up so early?" said Zabini.

Harry stared at him with wide eyes for several seconds. "Couldn't sleep," he finally mumbled.

Blaise looked at his friend with a cautious expression. "So ... excited for the Easter Break?"

"All that really happened," Harry said in a complete daze. "I'm here."

Then, to Blaise's shock and surprise, Harry rushed forward with an insane grin on his face and pulled him into a bearhug before lifting the boy off the ground and whirling him around in a circle.

"I'M BACK!" Harry bellowed jubilantly.

Then, he let Blaise go and darted back into his room. Completely shocked by the display, Blaise followed him inside.

"I wasn't aware you'd ever left," he said while closing the door behind him. Harry ignored the other boy and paced around his dorm room in excitement while muttering almost incoherently.

"Okay, gotta think. Gotta plan. Gotta ... *make a list!* Hermione was right!" Then, he suddenly turned back to

Blaise with a slightly mad expression. "*Proper planning prevents poor performance! ha-Ha!*"

"Aaaaand now you're doing the Lockhart laugh," Blaise muttered with some concern. Harry went back to ignoring the other boy as he pulled out a notebook and a quill.

"Okay, what's first?" he muttered to himself. "The first big thing was when Remus took the Map...." Harry paused suddenly at the recollection. Then, his eyes widened at *what else* he could recall.

"Malachi Sturgeon is actually the werewolf Remus Lupin." he said slowly to no one in particular before he laughed again, this time quite maniacally. It seemed that traveling back in time to a point before he learned Remus's Secret did not cause him to forget it once more! He still knew it!

"What did you just say?" Blaise asked in confusion.

"I don't know," Harry answered cautiously. "What did it *sound* like I said?"

Blaise stared at him for a few seconds, and to his surprise, Harry could almost *see* in Blaise's expression the moment the Fidelius kicked in.

"I ... don't know," Blaise said uncertainly. "I couldn't quite make it out."

Harry didn't answer but instead focused on his own thoughts. And when he couldn't think fast enough, he dilated slightly.

*"I know Remus's complete Secret but I can't share it because Dumbledore is the Secret Keeper. But I know a good bit about working around the Fidelius from the*

*experiments I did on the topic. So, what else do I know that I didn't know before? I know the Map can be used to track any of the Marauders. I know how to get into the Shrieking Shack. I know a Parselmagic Sectumsempra will totally kill a werewolf. I know James Potter is an even bigger prat than I ever imagined before and why. I know the Potter Prophecy, even if I've sworn an oath ... not ... to share ... it...."*

Harry's eyes widened and he suddenly sat down on the bed as his knees went weak.

"Harry, what is going on? You're scaring me!" Blaise exclaimed, now genuinely concerned about his friend. "Say something dammit!"

Harry ignored the other boy in favor of probing his own mind over his sudden realization. The strange sense of magic wrapping around his very heart to bind it against revealing the Potter Prophecy ... *was gone*. The boy pulled up all his memories of being under the Potter Oath's effects from prior to his time travel, but something was *definitely different* now. Then, he stiffened as he remembered the words of the Oath itself.

***"I, Hadrian Remus ... No-Name, make this Oath on my magic and on my soul. That from this moment forward until the day I die, I will keep the Secret of House Potter in my heart and share it with no outsiders. Let Magic itself bind my tongue against revelation both deliberate and unintentional save when speaking to those who are already witness to the Secret. Let the Secret preserve itself not just against my betrayal but also my indiscretion. So mote it be."***

*"Was it because I swore the oath as Hadrian Remus No-Name but I've gone back to being Harry Potter? No, I don't think identity works that way in an oath freely sworn. But what else could it be?"*

He thought through the words of the oath again, while an increasingly frightened Blaise Zabini tried continuously to get his attention. And on the third read-through, he saw it ... and laughed out loud.

*"From this moment forward until the day I die! That's what I swore! But this moment is in the future! I didn't swear the oath until around nine o'clock tomorrow night! And until then, I'm not under it!"*

Harry turned and looked Blaise straight in the eye. "This is how our world will end," he said clearly and distinctly. "In a cold yet all-consuming flame."

"Wh-what?!" Blaise sputtered in shock at the words. The boy actually staggered back slightly in complete surprise.

Harry jumped up from the bed excitedly. "I said – *This is how the world will end, In a cold yet all-consuming flame!* Heee!"

Blaise took a step backwards towards the door as Harry was practically jumping up and down in excitement.

*"If I'm bound by the Potter Oath at all,"* he thought excitedly, *"it won't be until tomorrow night! This changes everything!"*

He finally turned back to Blaise and clapped the other boy on the shoulders.

"Listen! I gotta do ... some stuff! Important stuff! You go on to breakfast! I'll catch you up later, okay?"

"Yeah, Harry. Sure." Blaise said weakly as Harry ushered him out the door before slamming it and locking it.

Blaise simply stared at the door for several moments. Anyone walking by would have thought he was unnaturally pale today. Almost to the point of looking sickly. Then, he came to his senses and looked around to see if anyone had seen him before taking two steps towards his dorm room ... and then breaking out into a panicked run.

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### ***Moments later ...***

"The *Last Potter* becomes the *Prince of Slytherin*?!" Regulus repeated slowly. "And James Potter told you this? The Potter family has known about the Prince of Slytherin for 200 years?!"

"I don't know *what* the Potter family knows, Reg. I don't even think James knows anything solid about the Prince position beyond the fact that it exists according to a True Prophecy. And I can't tell you any details about the circumstances under which I learned about it because ... *reasons*."

"Uh-huh. So why are you telling me about it at all?"

"*Because* I am pretty sure that in the very near future, I will be bound by a very restrictive oath not to tell *anyone* about it. I plan to tell a few others later today, but I wanted to tell you first to ... well, I don't know if there's anything you can actually *do* about it, but I thought it would be a good idea for *someone* not bound by an oath that a bunch of Gryffindors came up with to know about the Prophecy in

case we need to share it more broadly later. Or parts of it at least. Obviously, we're not spreading around the '*Prince of Slytherin*' bit to anyone outside our House. But other than Theo, you're the only person I would risk telling the whole thing to."

"I'm grateful for your trust in me, Harry."

"Don't be too grateful," Harry said sardonically. "I'm also under the Lair's protections. I *can't* talk about the Prince of Slytherin to just anyone. Right now, it's you, Theo, Marcus (who doesn't have any Occlumency), Lucius Malfoy, and Blaise Zabini. After you and Theo, my ability to trust the rest freely declines sharply. That's why I can't tell Sirius anything. Or at least not right now."

"Understood. I'll give this Prophecy some consideration. And perhaps pull out my old Divination books. I took it through OWLs, after all. We'll talk more about it over the Easter Break."

"Okay," said Harry. "But don't worry about it *today*. Stay close to the mirror and the Floo instead. I have a feeling either Rufus or Snape will be reaching out to you and Sirius in the next few hours."

Reg's eyes narrowed. "Harry? Are you scheming something?"

The boy sniffed. "I'm a Slytherin, Reg, just like you. We'll stop scheming when we're dead."

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***The Entrance to the Great Hall***  
**7:00 a.m.**

"Mr. Potter!" It was Malachi Sturgeon aka Remus Lupin aka *Moony the Werewolf*. Harry still marveled at how the Fidelius had actually persuaded him that there had been *two* Hogwarts students who shared the nickname '*Moony*.' The Caretaker swiftly strode up to him.

"Yes, Mr. ... Sturgeon?"

"Come with me, young man," Sturgeon said with what Harry had come to recognize as fake gruffness. Prepared for this encounter, Harry nodded to Blaise and then left the boy to follow Sturgeon to his office. Once inside, Remus Lupin dropped the grumpy caretaker act and could hardly contain his enthusiasm.

"Harry, I know this may seem like a strange request, but I must ask you to turn out your pockets and allow me to look through your bag."

"May I ask why, sir?" Harry asked politely.

Remus sighed. "Because I believe you have something in your possession that you should not. Now let me rephrase that as an order from a Hogwarts staff member. Hand over your bag and turn out your pockets."

"Of course," the boy said brightly as he complied. He emptied his pockets and his bookbag, but this time, there was nothing there to trigger Remus's excitement, as the Marauders' Map was presently sitting on a shelf in the Prince's Lair.

"May I ask what you're looking for, Mr. Lupin?"

"Harry, when we're alone, I do wish you would call me Remus. And I was looking for a special parchment which



Peeves assured me you had. Tell me, have you ever heard of the Marauder's Map?"

"I'm afraid not," Harry lied with perfect ease. "What is it?"

"Well, it's an enchanted Map made by your father and ... some of his friends back during our school days. I need it because I believe it can be used to track down *Sirius Black* and bring him to justice!"

"Wow, Remus! That's great! Gosh, I wish I could help you with it!"

"It's alright, Harry. It was foolish of me to simply rely on Peeves's honesty. It's a good thing I haven't given him those dung bombs yet."

"Very probably," Harry agreed while filing away for future reference the fact that Peeves was amenable to bribes.

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### ***Twenty minutes later ...***

After retrieving the Map from the Lair, Harry quickly set up a private meeting with Snape and Scrimgeour, though he was much more relaxed and composed for this one than the last time the three met together (from a subjective viewpoint anyway).

"Okay, first of all, there's a Fidelius in play, so I probably can't say everything I need to and will probably have to *lie* about some other things as a way of working around it." He activated the Map and set it on the table in front of the two Slytherins.

"This is the Marauders' Map. It was created by James Potter, Peter Pettigrew, Sirius Black, and Remus Lupin

when they were at school together, and believe it or not, they used it mainly for *pranks* instead of anything *we* would have used it for. Presently, the Caretaker, Malachi Sturgeon, is looking for it on behalf of Lupin and Pettigrew!"

"Why?" Snape asked suspiciously.

"*Because* in addition to showing the location of everyone in the castle and on the grounds, it can be modified to track down any of the Marauders *wherever they are in the country* even if hidden in an Unplottable location! In other words, Pettigrew can use it to track down Sirius!"

Snape and Scrimgeour looked at one another sharply.

"Does Sturgeon have any idea that it's in your possession?" the older man asked.

"Not yet," Harry replied. "But ... I'm wondering if I should just give it to him."

"What on Earth for, Potter?!" Snape exclaimed.

"Well, my first thought was to just hide it and deny all knowledge of it. But then, I realized: If Pettigrew gets the Map, he won't just turn it over to the Aurors. Pettigrew wants Sirius dead before he has a chance to talk and maybe persuade someone of his innocence, and I imagine he also wants to find the other Death Eaters so he can free them. So, he'll probably go himself and bring Greyback's pack along for backup."

"A plausible theory, Potter," Scrimgeour agreed. "That does not explain why we should *help him* to achieve those goals."

"Yeah, well, it *also* occurred to me that if Pettigrew knows where Sirius is and is likely to go there personally along

with a pack of werewolves, then *we* would know where *Pettigrew* is going to be at a time when he's doing something blatantly illegal that might expose him as a Death Eater!"

Snape snorted. "And do you have any actual plan for achieving that? Or just a vague, half-formed idea?"

"Just a vague, half-formed idea, Professor Snape. Which is why I brought it to the two cleverest Slytherins I know to see if you could *turn it into* an actual plan. If not, I can just hide the Map where no one will ever find it and then forget all about it."

"Potter ..." Snape began to lecture, but Scrimgeour interrupted.

"Hang on, Snape." Scrimgeour's eyes blazed for a second. Then, he closed them in concentration for several seconds before speaking again. "We can *use* this!"

The Potion Master's head whipped around. "We *can*?!"

"Yes, I think so. Potter, let everyone know that DADA is canceled for the day. I expect I may need to leave the school for a few hours."

He studied the Map and observed the tiny footprints making their way around the castle. "Do you know how exactly this can be used to locate Black, Mr. Potter?"

"I don't know all the spellwork involved, Professor Scrimgeour, but it's connected to Sirius and the other Marauders by the Homunculous Charm."

"Never heard of it," the man replied. "Which means we'll need a Charms Master. Can you get Lucius on the Floo,

Snape? Four snakes are better than three, after all."

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## ***Ancient Runes***

***11:55 a.m.***

At the end of Ancient Runes, Harry leaned over to Blaise who'd been anxious all through class.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "You've been twitchy all morning. Do you need to switch to decaf?"

"Very funny, Potter. And I'm perfectly fine. Now if you don't mind, I need to stay behind and speak to Professor Babbling. I have some questions about the assignment, and we won't see her again until after the Easter Break. I'll see you at lunch."

Harry looked at his friend oddly for a moment. "Sure thing," he finally said. Then, he made his way past Zabini and rushed to catch up with Hermione just outside the door.

"Hermione!"

The bushy-haired witch turned back to him.

"DADA is canceled this afternoon, so I was wondering if I could ask you to help me with a special project."

Hermione looked at him quizzically, if not suspiciously.

"What sort of project?"

He glanced around to make sure no one was nearby before leaning in to whisper. "*It has to do with what came out of the Cryptohedron.*"

The girl stepped back in shock. "How did ...?"

"Shhh!" he said with a smug grin. "Meet me near the Whomping Willow at one o'clock. No wait. Quarter past. I think I have a meeting with Luna Lovegood right after lunch."

Then, he sauntered on down the hall, leaving a shocked and confused Gryffindor behind him.

Inside the Ancient Runes classroom, Blaise Zabini and Bathsheba Babbling were engaged in a highly animated conversation that no one else heard because of some of the strongest privacy wards that had been cast on Hogwarts grounds in years.

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***Longbottom Manor***  
***12:30 p.m.***

"Well?" Rufus said as he stabbed a fork into a slice of Hoskins's famous Quiche Lorraine. "That's what I propose. What do you all think?"

Staring at the ex-Auror from around a very large table was every adult member of the Azkabal save Malfoy and Snape. And everyone of them was staring at Rufus with varying degrees of astonishment at his audacity. Sirius was the first to speak.

"Ted? Andi?" he inquired. "Am I cleared to drink Firewhiskey yet?"

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***The passage beneath the Whomping Willow***  
***1:15 p.m.***

Hermione had been surprised to learn from watching Harry that the Whomping Willow could be stilled by a Stunning

Hex targeting a specific knot. She was considerably more surprised when a secret passage opened beneath the tree and Harry led her down inside.

"How did you know about this?" Hermione asked suspiciously.

"Through weirdness, maybe?" he answered with a smirk before continuing down the passageway to the door leading to the Shrieking Shack. As Harry had anticipated, Luna Lovegood met him after lunch to present him with the Oscar Wilde book again, and once again, she very smoothly humiliated Pansy Parkinson by questioning her knowledge of the word "*dork*." Somehow, it was even funnier the second time he saw it. But that wasn't all he saw. The young Legilimens played closer attention to Pansy's response, and he remembered he would have to do something about the prank she and her bigoted friends would play on SPAM in a few hours. Harry had way too much to do to spend the night in the Infirmary again.

"Where are we, Harry?" Hermione asked as he opened the door and led her into the Shack. "And why are you being so cryptic?"

He laughed. "Not so much fun when it's someone *else* being mysterious all the time, is it?"

"Point taken. So, what is this place?"

"This, Hermione, is the legendary Shrieking Shack. It's thought to be the most haunted spot in Britain, but in fact, it's not really haunted at all. That was a fiction the Unspeakables came up with so that they could run experiments here back in the 1970's."

The witch did a double take. "Experiments? What sort of experiments?"

"Between a Fidelius and an Oath, I can't say everything, but I can tell you this much. Back in the day, the Unspeakables found a werewolf who'd been infected with lycanthropy as a small child and *somehow* held his sanity. He was allowed to attend Hogwarts, and he was brought here every full moon so that they could monitor his transformations and use him for experiments on potential cures for lycanthropy."

Hermione shuddered at the thought of experiments performed on a child, no matter how worthy the cause. "Did they ever find one?"

"No," Harry answered. "Just a potion that would let werewolves keep their human intelligence while transformed. Which was nice for the sane werewolf they were experimenting on, but not so much for all the psychotic werewolves out there who could use the potion to go on mass killing sprees."

She blanched. "Interesting. Also horrible. But what does all that have to do with ... what did you call it? A Cryptohedron?"

"Hermione, it's okay. I brought you here in part because I wanted a good look at this place in case it became necessary for later, but mainly so that you and I would be able to talk - *and I mean really talk* - without being overheard. I know about the Cryptohedron, I know about the Time-Turner, and I know that you are a time traveler."

Hermione gaped at her friend who simply smiled at her. "And by the way, thank you for saving me and Jim from the Dementor. And for everything else you've been doing since last summer."

"Harry! How do you *know* all this?"

"Easy. *You told me!*" he exclaimed. "Or *will* tell me. Man, verb tenses are *tough* when you're a time traveler, aren't they? But anyway, on the morning of March 28, you stunned a pair of Unspeakables and reprogrammed the Cryptohedron with my astrological information so that I could then summon the Time-Turner and travel back in time."

She gasped. "How far did you go?! And why?!"

"Not far at all," Harry answered. "I arrived this morning just before dawn. And you sent me back because in that prior timeline, I did something innocuous but still stupid that had the snowball effect of getting several innocent people killed and also delivering the werewolf potion I just mentioned into the hands of Peter Pettigrew who really is a Death Eater. He admitted in front of James Potter and myself that he was the one who really betrayed my family to Voldemort before framing Sirius Black for it and sending him to Azkaban. He also has some innate ability to mind control werewolves, and his plan is to use the potion to build a werewolf army loyal to him."

Hermione accepted all that with surprising equanimity. She *had* traveled to the current timeline from a dystopian future, after all.

"And as a result of all that," she said, "I had - or will have - the insane idea of sending you back in time to fix it? That sounds incredibly reckless of me!"

"Well, you *are* a Gryffindor."

"I will hex you, Harry Potter."



Harry laughed. "To be fair, I think you only decided to do it after I warned you about the possibility of a Werewolf Apocalypse. But you reassured me that the Time-Turner itself was okay with it or it would have stopped you. Next thing I know, I've gone back in time, the people who I watched die over the last two days are alive, and I'm back to calling myself Potter instead of No-Name."

Hermione gasped. "James disinherited you?!"

"James *used the Ultimate Sanction* on me."

The witch's face turned almost red with anger. "Your father ... did *that*?! That ... that ... honestly, I don't even know what to call him!"

"I think '*vile fiend*' was the phrase you used when I told you the first time."

"And I was clearly justified. Can you avoid whatever actions gave him a basis for using the Sanction?"

"I think so. I've got plans in motion." He hesitated. "There's ... something else that happened. I want to share with you. Well, share most of it anyway. Before I came back, I heard a True Prophecy."

"From whom?! Please say it wasn't Professor Trelawney! Or ... Oh Good Lord! Please say it wasn't from *me*!"

Despite the seriousness, Harry laughed. "Are you afraid you might be a seer after all?"

Hermione huffed. "With everything else that's happened this year, it would be a perfectly ironic capstone."

"Well, I'm sorry to disappoint, but it wasn't you. And it wasn't Trelawney, either. Or at least, not *our* Trelawney. I heard it from James It was a recitation of a True Prophecy given from one of Trelawney's ancestors to a Potter back in the 18th century."

And with that, Harry revealed the entire 1780 Potter Prophecy ... almost.

*And you shall know by these portents  
that the time of the Dark God approaches  
and the Destruction of our World  
is close at hand:*

*When the Two who should be as One  
Are set against each other in reckless hate  
And the Last Potter ... Something Something .*

Hermione had listened to the entire prophecy with an expression of increasing horror until Harry reached the last line. Then, her expression turned to one of confusion instead.

"Something ... something? What? Did the seer nod off and start mumbling at that point?"

"Sorry, the last line, unfortunately, implicates something I'm involved with that's covered by an unrelated oath."

Hermione nodded. "But you're afraid the trigger for all the preceding '*trapped forever in the Dark God's Hell*' business is you and Jim hating one another and you personally ... doing the something something you can't tell me about?"

"Exactly."

"Hang on, though," she said thoughtfully. "Harry, you're *not* the Last Potter. Are you? I mean, Jim was born after you, right? Surely, *he's* the Last Potter, at least until one of you has children of your own!"

"I know. And I don't understand that part. All I know is that I am the first Potter in at least 200 years to be in a position to ... do the Something, so I can't help but wonder if something's going to happen in the near future to *make me* the Last Potter."

"Is that why James used the Ultimate Sanction? To eliminate any possibility of you being a Potter in any possible prophetic sense?"

Harry nodded and looked away. Even though it had been undone by his time travel, Harry was still inwardly furious at James for invoking the Ultimate Sanction. Not only because of how it would have ruined all his own plans or even because it was *cruel*, but also because it was just so *stupid*! If James Potter had only sat him down at some point and *explained* the Prophecy to him, they could have worked something out. He'd already been making plans for emancipation during the summer, and while Pettigrew's original bribe of two-million Galleons was small change, the boy felt sure they could have come to acceptable terms for him simply leaving the family voluntarily. Instead, James had dropped the social equivalent of an atom bomb on his son, and worse, in a way that ensured he and Jim would hate each other forever!

*"Honestly, what is it about James Potter that always drives him to make the worst choice?"* Harry thought. *"It can't just be a Gryffindor thing! I can't imagine Hermione or Neville ever being that short-sighted!"*

After some thought, Hermione spoke up. "Well, I'll give it some thought ... what with my *Third Eye* and all. But at first glance, it seems you only have two options. Stop being a Potter, or make sure that you never ... something something. Or both, I suppose, if you want to be thorough."

"Yeah," Harry said sourly. "I kind of figured as much."

Hermione looked around the room which was dimly lit by her and Harry's twin Lumos spells. "So, Pettigrew brought you and your father here, what, to gloat?"

"Yes! He actually gave a *monologue*! As a Slytherin, I was deeply offended." Then, his mouth twitched as he recalled what happened, and he swallowed deeply before continuing.

"He put Marcus Flint under the Imperius and had him stun me and bring me here. I don't know how he got James here. Not important, I guess. But he also had ... the werewolf I mentioned here."

There was a sudden hitch in his voice. "Pettigrew just killed Marcus in front of me. For no reason except cruelty. And then, he left us right as the werewolf started to transform. The guy was begging Pettigrew not to do it – somehow, in all his years, he'd never actually killed anyone during a transformation. I was to be his first victim."

"But you killed him instead," Hermione said softly. Harry nodded, his eyes blinking rapidly. "He's alive now, though, right? Alright then, we'll just have to keep him that way."

She took a step forward. "Permission to hug you?"

Harry chuckled. "Okay, just this once."

The Gryffindor pulled Harry into a gentle hug as he brought his emotions back under control. Then, they separated and made a quick exploration of the Shack. Everything was as Harry remembered it from his brief imprisonment here, but one thing in an adjacent room caught Hermione's eye: a glint of metal that caught the light of her wand from something near the front door of the Shack.

It was a small brass orb with a cracked shell and a shattered glass lens embedded in one side.

"Harry, what do you make of this?" she asked as she picked the object up.

He shrugged. "I don't know. It wasn't here before ... in the future, I mean. Maybe Pettigrew moved it or something. What do you think it is?"

Hermione studied the orb carefully and made note of a series of runes carved onto the brass casing.

"You said the Unspeakables used this place for testing?"

"Yes. Why?"

The witch turned the orb over to examine the glass lens, and then, her mouth puckered as if she were pouting.

"I swear, if the Unspeakables actually have *audio-visual recording equipment* while the rest of Wizarding Britain is stuck listening to *radio shows* like from out of the 1940's. ...!"

"You think it's a camera?!"

"Yes. Though I suppose wizards have some insipidly twee name for it. Probably one that's also a terrible pun. *Eye-*

*Spy* or something like that."

Harry's expression grew speculative. "Do you think it can be repaired?"

"Possibly," she said with a smile. "Luckily, I'm part of a very good research team!"

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***Ministry of Magic***

***Auror Department***

***The Office of Senior Auror Pius Thicknesse***

***1:45 p.m.***

Pius Thicknesse had been quite surprised and somewhat confused when his former boss, Rufus Scrimgeour, showed up in his office out of the blue to "*visit and reminisce*." While he'd always admired the legendary figure, Pius had only recently moved into the Senior ranks. Before that, his memories of things the two men could *reminisce* about were limited to delivering case reports and occasionally getting yelled at back in his salad days. Alas at Hogwarts, Pius had been a Gryffindor, and though he was a good bit sharper than the stereotypical lion, he was certainly not accustomed to the subtleties of small talk with a Slytherin. Consequently, he was completely gobsmacked when Rufus finally got to the point of his visit.

"So, let me see if I've got this quite straight," Pius said slowly. "You have information – from a source who wishes to remain anonymous but who you consider to be completely reliable – as to *the current location of Fenrir Greyback's pack?*!"

"Yes," Rufus answered placidly. "That sums up the situation precisely."

The Senior Auror stared at the old wizard in confusion.  
"Okay then. But why are you bringing this to *me*? Why not straight to the Chief ...?"

Pius trailed off in embarrassment as he remembered that the man sitting across from his desk had *been* the Chief Auror less than a year before. And he suspected that Scrimgeour had no love for his replacement, particularly since he'd been forced into retirement after being gravely wounded at a birthday party for *said replacement's sons*!

"Because I would like to see this matter handled competently instead of someone rushing in as flashily as possible because he cares more about P.R. benefits than proper procedure. How's that for an answer? I can give you the location I believe they're using as a base, but the timing must be precise because, according to my sources, the werewolves may not actually be there until sometime tonight."

Scrimgeour smirked. "And I gather James Potter likes to be out of the office no later than four o'clock in the afternoon. Perhaps because that's when Happy Hour starts at the Leaky Cauldron? Though I suppose I shouldn't spread base rumors like that."

"Chief ... Mr. Scrimgeour...."

"Please, Senior Auror. I'm just a civilian now. Call me Rufus."

"Okay, then, *Rufus*. I know about your feelings towards Chief Potter. And I must warn you I have no intention of acting against him to further some scheme of yours. Especially when the matter involves something as serious as werewolves!"

"Why, Senior Auror! I would never ask you to do something nefarious. And your sense of loyalty to James Potter is inspiring, especially since you were a Gryffindor rather than a Hufflepuff. Three years ahead of Potter, wasn't it? It must have been frustrating to see someone three years your junior be elevated above you to a Senior Auror slot. And at such a young age, too! I believe that was *seven years* he held this very office while you remained a Junior, wasn't it? Oh, well – you're here at last!"

Pius glared at the man and his insinuations. "I'm not *jealous* of James Potter."

"Of course not. Jealousy is when you're angry that someone is simply better than you in some way. Being justifiably angry over someone's unfair political advantage due solely from having a famous son isn't *jealousy*. It's *righteous indignation*."

Before the Auror could respond, Rufus continued. "By the way, I'm curious. What was it *like* to share a dorm for four years with young James Potter?"

Pius's glare deepened, but now, it was no longer directed solely at Scrimgeour.

"My last name is *Thicknesse*, Rufus," he finally said with a hint of a sneer. "And Potter and his cronies prided themselves on what they thought of as *being witty*. I'm sure you can just *imagine* the nicknames for me they gleefully spread across the school for four years!"

Scrimgeour snorted softly in commiseration. "Yes, I suppose I can. But it was a bit more than cruel nicknames, wasn't it? I seem to recall something in your file about an incident late in your Sixth Year ...?"



Thicknesse shot out of his chair angrily. "Yes, I'm sure you do *recall* it, Rufus, since it's *still* in my permanent file! Yes! Late in my Sixth Year, those damned Marauders played a mean-spirited and embarrassing prank on me that humiliated me in front of half the school, and I lost my temper and hexed Potter and his friends badly. Which, as I'm sure you know, is not something one does to the Heir of an Ancient and Noble House. I spent the last month of school in detention and lost my Prefect's badge, even though I'd been the leading candidate to become Head Boy during my last year!"

He slapped his hand against the desk. "But dammit, Rufus! I'm not a schoolboy anymore! And I have no intention of jeopardizing my job just to get back at James Potter for something that happened twenty years ago, let alone mucking about where bloody werewolves are concerned!"

"Pius, my boy! You have nothing to worry about. I'm not asking you to do anything like that."

The Senior Auror fell back in his chair. "Well for Merlin's sake, what *are* you asking me to do?!"

Rufus brought his hands up and steepled his fingers as he fixed Thicknesse with an intense gaze.

"I am simply asking for you to *do your job*, Senior Auror. I am asking you to work late tonight. And when you receive word from an anonymous but trusted source as to the location of those *bloody werewolves*, that you investigate and act appropriately. *But* I am also asking that if James Potter has already left for the day, you do not trouble him over what might well be a wild goose chase. You are a Senior Auror. You have the authority to pursue leads on

your own initiative and to request backup from the junior Aurors and the DMLE as you see fit.

"*All I ask*, Pius, is that you do this in a way that will earn you the accolades that you *deserve* instead of allowing a man who you do not particularly respect nor even like to step in and claim all the glory for himself ... *again!*"

Rufus spread his arms out magnanimously and smiled.  
"Now, is that *really* so much to ask for?"

---

***Hogwarts***  
***The Caretaker's Office***  
***4:30 p.m.***

"What can I do for you, Harry?" Remus asked in surprise as the young Slytherin stepped into his room.

"It's ... it's about that matter you mentioned this morning," Harry said contritely. "You know, *the Map?*"

"What about it?" Remus asked somewhat suspiciously. Then, he gasped as Harry pulled the familiar parchment from a pocket.

"I'm sorry, Remus. I should have told you this morning. The truth is – I've had the Map for quite some time. But I'd given it to Theo No-Name. You know how he's been treated lately what with the Ultimate Sanction and all. So, I gave him the Map so that he could avoid people affected by the Sanction who are prone to hexing him in the halls."

Then, he gave the former Marauder a somewhat pointed look. "You know how cruel bullies can be."

Remus winced slightly. "Er, yes, I, ah, do indeed. Though hopefully, they eventually grow out of it. But I understand and applaud your decision to help your friend. With luck, I can get this back to you before the end of Easter Break!"

Harry nodded. "So, what exactly will you be doing with it?"

"It's a bit complicated, but I have a friend I need to show this to at once. We'll need to modify the spellwork on the Map, but once we have, it will lead us *straight to Sirius Black!*"

Harry smiled broadly. "Well, then. I'll leave you to it. Here's hoping everything goes according to plan!"

---

***The Law Office of Peter Pettigrew, Esq.***  
***4:50 p.m.***

*"Let me handle it."*

Remus blinked a few times. Then, he smiled. "Alright. If you insist. Thank you, Peter. It's good to know you'll always have my back."

Peter smiled. "Of course! That's what friends are for!" Then, he cocked his head as a new thought sprang to mind.

"Still it might be necessary to let James know of your identity when I meet with him. By any chance, do you have that note with the Secret written out on it?"

Remus returned his best friend's smile as he reached into his jacket pocket.

---

***The Prince's Lair***  
**6:00 p.m.**

"Well?"

Theo No-Name just stared wide-eyed at his best friend.

"That's ... a lot to take in in under a minute, Harry. Let me see if I've got everything. You can't tell me the source of your information, but you believe Peter Pettigrew is trying to steal a potion that lets him control intelligent

werewolves. You're not only involved with the Azkaban breakout, you're an official member of – and I can't believe you're allowing it to be called this – the *Azkabal*, but you can't give me any specifics. Sirius Black is innocent.

Regulus Black is alive and spent our Second Year posing as Gilderoy Lockhart before lobotomizing the real Gilderoy Lockhart. But despite that, he's a good guy. Peter Pettigrew is not just an evil lawyer but is also a Death Eater which may or may not be worse. And the real reason your father hates you is a True Prophecy from 1780 that predicts a Potter becoming Prince of Slytherin will bring about the end of the world. Have I left anything out?"

"No, those are all the important points, I think. Oh, this isn't a major thing, but I have reason to believe the Cultural Preservation Society is planning to poison everyone in SPAM later tonight with a poorly conceived prank. But I've already taken care of it so that won't happen. Also, I think your Wu Xi Do instructor is currently Peter Pettigrew's prisoner, but it'll turn out alright. I hope."

"Right. Got it." Theo nodded slowly. "Thank you for trusting me with all this information."

"I trust you completely, Theo. I have since we were First Years."

"I'm glad to hear that Harry. It means a lot to me. By the way, Ron Weasley is a Parselmouth."

"... what?"

"Yeah, I'd promised to keep it a secret, but in light of everything you just dropped on me, I feel strangely obligated to reveal a secret of my own, and that's really the only one I can think of."

---

***Peter Pettigrew's apartment in Diagon Alley***  
***6:15 p.m.***

"So what do you want us to do with this, Peter?" Fenrir said gruffly as he peered over the Marauder's Map.

"As it is? Nothing. It's not ready yet."

As Peter spoke, he fished a small vial out of his jacket pocket containing several drops of Remus Lupin's blood. After removing the cork, he added a few drops of his own blood, followed by two black hairs taken from small vials in the chest. One was labeled *Sirius Black* and the other *James Potter*. He swirled the vial in his hand before upending it over the Marauders' Map. Then, he touched his wand to the blood and hair spatter and muttered a few words. Instantly, the display of Hogwarts melted away. After a few seconds, there were only four dots remaining: Remus Lupin, James Potter, and Peter Pettigrew grouped close together to the bottom, and Sirius Black further up.

Peter furrowed his brow as he compared the Marauders' Map to a map of Great Britain.

"What is it?" Fenrir asked. Peter looked up at him with a confused expression.

"What the hell is Sirius Black doing in ... *Suffolk?!'*"

Neither Fenrir nor Stavros had any answers to that. Nor did Remus Lupin, who was in the spare bedroom, unconscious from the Draught of Living Death that Peter had slipped into his tea.

---

## ***Hogwarts***

### ***The SPAM Meeting Room***

***6:30 p.m.***

The door to the classroom opened slightly, just enough for Cedric Diggory to see inside.

"The coast is clear," he whispered to his confederate and girlfriend, Cho Chang. The two quickly entered, with Chang carrying a sheet cake on a silver platter. There was a table already set up with snacks and punch provided by the school's house elves, but it took Diggory only a few seconds to rearrange the table to make room for the cake.

"You think it looks alright?" Diggory said nervously.

"It looks fine, Ced," the Ravenclaw replied. "Those SPAM brats will never know what hit them!"

"And what, exactly, *will* hit them, Cho Chang?" said an unexpected voice from the far side of the room.

It was Head Boy Bobby Latimer who whipped off an Invisibility Cloak to reveal himself, George Weasley, and Percy Weasley. The three had been waiting here in response to a tip from Hermione who had told Jim that she'd "*overheard some slimy snakes plotting to poison us at our meeting tonight,*" an accusation that Jim easily accepted as true once he heard it.

But there were no Slytherins here now, just a Hufflepuff prefect and his girlfriend, the Ravenclaw Seeker.

"Lattimer," Cedric stammered. "Wh-what are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question, Diggory. You're not a member of SPAM, are you? So why, might I ask, are you gifting them with a dessert?"

While Diggory and Chang struggled to come up with an excuse for their presence, George strode past them to the table. He stuck his finger into the frosting and then put it in his mouth before spitting the frosting out angrily.

"Tastes a lot like the recipe for Disparaging Dainties, though it's not diluted enough. Apparently, these *Pureblood wankers* can't follow a recipe very well. Good thing we caught 'em before they made anyone sick!"

"George!" Percy chided.

"Sorry, Percy, I couldn't help myself. It's the potion in the frosting, you see." George said with a smirk.

"I don't know what you're on about, Weasley!" Cho Chang spat. "That cake is ... just a gift from the CPS to SPAM! A peace offering, so to speak."

"Well, then," he answered merrily. "In the interests of keeping the peace, why don't you prove to us that the cake is safe to eat ... by having a slice yourself."

As George spoke, he cut off two bite-sized slices of cake with a few wand slashes and then levitated them onto small plates which he handed off to Diggory and Chang. The two looked down at the plates and then up at each other. With a

visible gulp, Diggory picked up the small slice of cake and popped it into his mouth. He chewed cautiously for a few seconds and then swallowed before turning to Bobby Lattimer with nervous expression.

"You see?" he said. "There's nothing at all wrong with the cake ... *M-m-mudblood!*"

Bobby sighed and shook his head in disappointment. "Come on, you two. We're going to see the Deputy Headmistress."

---

### ***Later ...***

"You're late!" Oliver barked at George when he finally made it into the Gryffindor locker room.

"Sorry, prefect business," George said. Fred scoffed at that, and in return, George shot him a dirty look before turning to Jim. "By the way, I gave your cloak to Ron to hold until after practice. Thanks, Jim. It worked perfectly."

"Who was it?" Jim asked excitedly. "Some of the Slytherins?"

"No, actually. It was Cedric Diggory and Cho Chang. They tried to trick the SPAM kids into eating a potion-laced cake!" He glanced over towards his twin with a sneer.

"You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you, *oh Brother-of-Mine?*"

"Not a blessed thing," Fred responded through gritted teeth. "Though I thank you for assuming that I might try to poison the members of a club I belong to!"

"Enough!" Oliver Wood exclaimed, his voice cracking slightly. "I don't want to hear anything more about stupid



pranks or SPAM! Let's ... let's just get up in the air."

The Gryffindors' late-night practice passed without incident, as did the SPAM meeting (now that the offending cake had been removed). Cedric Diggory took full responsibility for the aborted prank and refused to name any co-conspirators. He and Cho Chang were each docked twenty house points and sentenced to a week of detentions after the upcoming Easter Break, but as no one was hurt or even affected, no further penalties were imposed.

The Weasley Twins did *not* find common ground, and so their feud continued. Pansy Parkinson would *not* receive a Howler the next day, as House Parkinson lost no galleons due to her failed prank. Harry decided *not* to tell Hermione how much money he'd inadvertently cost her charity by not letting the prank play out as it did before.

---

### ***After the uneventful SPAM meeting ...***

"So, tell me again where you got this thing?" Anthony Goldstein said suspiciously as he held up the brass orb Hermione had given him earlier in the day.

"Tell me if you can fix it first," Harry replied while Hermione and Su looked on with interest.

"Not completely," Anthony answered. "Basically, it's a magical video camera that can fly under its own power and record whatever it sees. That's *a lot* of runes carved into it. Restoring complete functionality would take months."

"What about just the recording functions?"

"Fixing the audio part should be pretty easy. Most of those runes are still intact. But I'd have to replace the lens with

something custom-made to get it to make video recordings. And it would take weeks to repair all the damaged runes that allow it to fly."

"But if I just needed an audio recorder?"

Anthony glanced over to his partner, Su Li. "Tomorrow before lunch?"

Harry smiled. "Perfect."

"But what do you need it for?" Su Li asked suspiciously.

"Let's just say ... insurance." Harry smiled at the two Ravenclaws, who studied him suspiciously but were willing to be drawn into "*Slytherin schemes*" for a chance to work with the orb. To a pair of ambitious young Ravenclaws, the possibility of reverse-engineering the odd device was too intoxicating to ignore.

---

***Dunny-on-the-Wold, Suffolk***  
***11:45 p.m.***

Dunny-on-the-Wold was a tuppenny-ha'penny place - half an acre of sodden marshland in the Suffolk Fens with a single farmhouse on it. The entire population consisted of an elderly Muggle farmer with three rather mangy cows, a dachshund named Colin, and a small hen in its late forties. Said farmer was, naturally quite surprised when a gentleman from London showed up three weeks ago to purchase Dunny-on-the-Wold for far more than it was worth. Soon after, the farmer, the cows, the dachshund, and the hen had moved on, and "the Azkabal" set about making the farmhouse into a suitable "secret base" for the next phase of their plan.

Earlier today, those plans were suddenly accelerated when Rufus Scrimgeour summoned the other conspiracy members and explained his proposal. This led to a mad dash of transporting comatose prisoners, plus one magically altered and preserved corpse, from Longbottom Manor to the disused farmhouse and then finalizing the farm's defensive wards. Their work complete, most of the conspirators departed Dunny-on-the-Wold, leaving the Black brothers and their cousin, Nymphadora Tonks, behind to wait. They only had one portkey between them, but it was a very special (if experimental) one.

The endgame of "Operation Marcellus Frump" began just after nine o'clock, when three Aurors led by Pius Thicknesse Apparated to a position a quarter mile away from the farmhouse to set up surveillance. The wizards quickly discerned that there were three figures moving about the farmhouse, two males and one female. But it was impossible to tell anything more than that due to the surprisingly sophisticated wards and defenses on the place. Disarming those defenses would take time, while a frontal assault would warn whoever was inside before they could get through.

Auror Dawlish proposed attacking anyway, but Pius overruled him. If the tip was truly accurate, he explained, then an unknown number of werewolves would descend on this place sometime tonight, and he didn't want to get caught with attackers on both sides. Instead, they would wait behind wards and Notice-Me-Not Charms of their own until the ideal time to strike. Back at headquarters, another squad of Junior Aurors and a dozen DMLE hit wizards were waiting on standby if reinforcements were needed.

The Senior Auror's patience was rewarded at a quarter to midnight when several soft pops heralded new arrivals. It

was young Savage who was manning the Omnioculars that first saw them.

"Thicknesse, I read eight figures. Seven are definitely partially transformed werewolves, and I have a positive ID on Fenrir Greyback. The last figure seems to be a wizard ... in what appears to be a *Death Eater uniform!*"

"Are we going in?" asked Dawlish nervously.

"Hold position," Thicknesse answered. "If there's that many of them, we'll need backup." Then, he pulled his wand and summoned his turtle Patronus with a message for Auror Control that included the Apparation coordinates to their location.

"Your Patronus is a turtle?" Dawlish said with some amusement.

"Yes, it is, Dawlish," Thicknesse muttered tightly. "Remind me - what's yours again?"

"... touché," replied his fellow Auror who had yet to master the difficult Charm.

The Aurors returned to their surveillance, but they were surprised by what happened next. The werewolves made no effort to enter the farmhouse. Instead, they took up positions around the building and then cast the *Dark Mark* over it before targeting the wards with Blasting Curses. Although the shielding spells cast on the farmhouse held up for the moment, the building would likely not stand much longer. While confused by this development, Pius decided that, whatever the werewolves' objective, it would be best to thwart it. At his direction, the three Aurors mounted brooms they'd brought along and took to the air

before targeting the werewolves with their most powerful curses.

For the first few minutes, the Aurors, despite their aerial tactics, were at a disadvantage due to the werewolves' superior numbers and damage resistance. But soon, reinforcements arrived, and the werewolves began to fall. It took four simultaneous Stunners to take down Fenrir Greyback, and in response, the lone Death Eater surprised everyone by turning into a small animal of some kind and scampering into the underbrush before anyone could think to target it. Within minutes, three of the werewolves were dead and the rest incapacitated ... at which point, the farmhouse shook violently from the sound of some internal explosion.

After securing the scene, Pius Thicknesse led a squad into the farmhouse, but to his surprise, the place was empty.

"How did they get out while the Dark Mark was up?" Savage asked. "It blocks Apparation and Portkeys!"

One hint as to the answer was found in the living room where the floor was scorched and blackened (and in some areas was still burning, though the flames were quickly extinguished). There were some recently used bedrolls against the wall, but what drew Pius's attention was a thick wooden box on the kitchen table that had a note which read "OPEN ME!" stuck to the top. Pius checked it for traps before opening it. On the inside were several vials which looked to contain stored memories, along with a sealed letter labeled "*For the Aurors.*"

Before Pius could examine the box or the letter any further, Dawlish called for him from a nearby staircase leading down.

"Thicknesse! You need to see this!"

Pius closed the box and scooped it up under his arms before following his fellow Auror down the stairs. At the bottom was a large cellar containing four bodies resting on pallets. One was clearly dead but preserved in a medical stasis Charm, and it appeared to be Bellatrix Lestrange! Two others were clearly the Lestrange Brothers, both of whom were comatose. The fourth figure was also comatose, and after removing the metal mask covering his face (which, oddly, had been charmed to play an annoying Muggle tune of some kind on a loop), he was revealed as Augustus Rookwood.

"Holy shit!" Pius muttered to himself.

"Looks like your *anonymous source* knew more than they were telling," Dawlish noted. "Care to tell us who he or she is now?"

"He ... or she ... wants anonymity, Dawlish. Ask me again when all those clowns are back in custody where they belong, and we'll see if that's still the case."

Within thirty minutes, the Aurors had completely secured the scene of the crime and transported the Death Eaters back to holding cells at the Ministry.

At which point things became ... *complicated*.

---

***Peter Pettigrew's Apartment***  
***27 March 1994***  
***12:20 a.m.***

With a loud pop, Peter Apparated into his apartment still covered in mud. Angrily, he threw back his hood and ripped

off his Death Eater mask. Then, he spent the next minute cursing a blue streak. After getting that out of his system, he poured himself a double shot of Firewhiskey and downed it instantly.

"Okay, okay," he babbled to himself. "So *that* was a complete disaster. But Fenrir and Stavros were the only ones who could identify me, and neither of them will break under torture. At least, not immediately. So, I just need to calm down and ...."

Before he could finish that sentence, he was distracted by a strange vibration in his jacket pocket. He reached into the pocket and pulled out the Marauders' Map, which was the source of the sensation. With twitchy hands, he unfolded the Map and saw that there was writing on it. Writing he'd never seen from the Marauder's Map before, but whose handwriting looked familiar.

***Hello Peter,***

***How's your night been so far? Mine has been quite enjoyable watching your little werewolf pals get put down like the feral animals they are. Of course, it was a disappointment that you got away, but you won't get far. It's over!***

Peter stared at the Map in utter confusion. "Who *are* you?!" he screamed.

***Haha! Who do you think? You've been using our Map to track me with the Homunculous Charm, but it turns out that connection can work both ways. In fact, according to a Charms expert of my acquaintance, there's all kinds of clever things you can do with the Homunculous Charm!***

"SIRIUS!" Peter shrieked furiously. But then, his anger gave way to fear. Quickly, he darted over to the fireplace and tossed the Map onto the cold embers before blasting it with an Incendio. Then, he looked around wildly as if afraid there was already a big black Grim watching him from the shadows.

Shaking off the urge to panic, Peter ran to his desk and quickly jotted out two letters which he then sealed. Next to the desk was an owl cage. He banged on the cage loudly to wake up the occupant, a Eurasian pygmy owl named Gofer that stood barely six inches tall. Peter had needed an owl, of course. No wizarding solicitor could function without one. But at heart, he was and always would be a rat, and he always had the vague suspicion that all owls, including his own, looked at him as potential food. Consequently, he picked one small enough that Wormtail could take him in a fight if it came to it.

He handed off the letters to the tiny yet indignant owl. "Take this letter to Gringotts immediately. Do not wait for a reply. Carry the second one to Jim Potter at Hogwarts. After that, you are free. Do not return to me."

Gofer hooted loudly at that, and Peter didn't know whether it was angry or delighted at the dismissal, not that it mattered to him either way. He opened the window and practically tossed the pygmy owl from it. Then, he looked around the room as if deciding what he needed to take, assuming he even had time to take anything at all. Luckily, there was truly only one thing that mattered, and it was easy to transport.

Peter marched over to the picture on the wall – the one with the four teenaged Marauders – and activated its enchantment before entering the secret room hidden



behind it in wizard-space. He was only inside for a few minutes before emerging with a leather satchel slung over his shoulder and a small object in his hands. It was a tin box painted in bright childish colors with a hand-turned crank on one side. He set the box on the coffee table in his living room and carefully turned the crank a few times causing the box to play a soft tune that Muggles would recognize as "*Pop Goes the Weasel*." An odd choice to be sure, for there were no weasels on the box, just bright green snakes with happy cartoonish faces that were climbing bright yellow ladders on a bright orange background.

He cranked the box until the tune was nearly complete. And then, he edged away from it with incredible caution, as if the slightest mistake could mean death. Which, in this instance, it likely would.

Angrily, Peter snatched the picture of the Marauders off the wall before stuffing it into the satchel. Then, he carefully make his way around the table and the box to his spare bedroom where Remus Lupin lay sleeping the sleep of the dead. Peter looked at his friend fondly. And then, he looked to the window, through which the light of the nearly full moon shone.

"I'm not beaten yet, Padfoot," he said. "Not by a long shot."

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***Hogwarts***  
***Harry's Room***  
***27 March 1994***  
***1:00 a.m.***

Harry had retired to his room almost immediately after the SPAM meeting ended to await the news. To pass the time, he'd been perusing a book he'd found in the Library about

Animagi when his mirror finally began to vibrate. He snatched it up and activated it.

"Well?!" he exclaimed.

Regulus chuckled. "Relax. Everything went off mostly without a hitch. Rufus's contacts in the Ministry say that Greyback's entire pack is now locked up in holding cells along with the Lestranges and Rookwood, who are all still under Draught of Living Death. The only injury to the good guys were a few burns we all suffered due to George Weasley's Super-Portkey, which still has some kinks in it but works better than it did at Azkaban. The Tonkses have already healed us all up."

"And Pettigrew?" Harry pressed.

Regulus sighed. "He got away ... for now. But the memory samples we left behind clearly implicate him, and the Aurors on the scene reported a masked wizard in Death Eater robes accompanying the werewolves who escaped by transforming into a rat."

"Uh-huh. And what was James's response to that news?"

"Unknown, so far. In fact, Rufus speculates that the Senior Auror who led the raid may be keeping him out of the loop for now. But even if he's involved, well, I know you don't think much of the man, but surely he's not such a buffoon that he would ignore the evidence against Pettigrew!"

"I wouldn't bet a single Knut when it comes to my father's potential for buffoonery. Can the Rat still track Sirius with the Map?"

"No, the Homunculous connection was severed shortly after Sirius sent him a taunting message through that Charm

Lucius provided. Most likely because Pettigrew destroyed the Map."

"... a taunting message? Was that really the most practical idea under the circumstances?"

"Yes, actually. Lucius figured out how to use Sirius's Homunculous link to the Map to send Pettigrew a message, but that's really all we could do. So, we had him taunt Pettigrew into *thinking* we could do more in order to manipulate him into destroying the only means he had of tracking us. I am sorry for the loss of your heirloom, though."

Harry grimaced. "Well, I *liked* that Map. But I like having a godfather more. I still wish the Aurors had caught him though."

"It will be alright, Harry," Regulus said reassuringly. "Try to get some rest." A second later, the mirror image returned to Harry's normal reflection.

But sleep did not come. Harry stared up at the darkened ceiling pensively. So long as Pettigrew was free, he couldn't rest. He'd watched too many good people die in the prior timeline to take anything for granted.

"*Time flies when one wastes it*," Harry muttered to himself. It was a quote from one of Salazar Slytherin's books he'd found in the Prince's Lair. Harry rubbed his face with his hands. Then, he blinked suddenly in confusion.

"Time ... flies...."

Instantly, he sat up in bed and summoned his wand to his hand. "***EXPECTO PATRONUM!***"

---

***A hotel room in Le Quartier Magique, Paris, France  
Just a few moments later ...***

Albus Dumbledore awoke suddenly from a deep slumber at the explosion of silvery light that instantly appeared in his hotel room. It was a Patronus, and one he'd never seen before, which manifested as a very long and intimidating boa constrictor. Dumbledore's surprise grew into astonishment when the Patronus spoke in the voice of a student he knew very well.

"Professor Dumbledore, this is Harry Potter. I'm sorry to wake you so late, but some things have happened back here in Britain that I think demand your attention." The voice hesitated for a second before delivering two final fateful words. "*Tempus fugit!*"

The old man's eyes widened in astonishment as the Patronus faded away, and then, he drew a deep breath.

"*FAAAAAWKKEES!*"

## Chapter End Notes

Next: James gets a wake-up call. Peter strikes back. And Prof. Trelawney has something to add.

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P\*\*\*\*\*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2 (What the Sinister Man is reading): Nothing new, atm.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors:

Anne-athema Codex, crag, BlueWater5, Dr. Nemo, Flareix\_, Happy (Chelonie), HeidiWolf, Kid Coheed, Krisni, Luc the Virtual Arm Twister, Pavi, Pivosh, pizdets UTC+10, Pokeflute, Prince of Conspiracy, sfu, Sigurd, Skyrmion, and Team Frigg. Thanks guys!

AN4: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 13,045. Followers: 14,090. Favorites: 12,243. Communities: 214. Discord followers: Over 2000! Go Team POS!

AN5: The description of Dunny-on-the-Wold (that "tuppenny-ha'penny place") is from the Blackadder III episode "Dish and Dishonesty," if anyone was wondering about the strange longevity of that hen.

# Redux (Part 2)

## Chapter Notes

### SHAMELESS PLUG!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### ***Chapter 43: Redux (Part 2)***

#### ***A conference room in the DMLE 27 March 1994, 4:20 a.m.***

James Potter struggled not to yawn as he made his way into the conference room. He'd been awoken by a Potter house elf twenty minutes earlier and told that his presence at the Ministry was needed urgently. And so he'd quickly forced down both a Pepper-Up and a Sober-Up while pulling back on the rumpled uniform he'd left lying on the floor a few hours earlier. He and a few co-workers had gone to the Leaky Cauldron for Happy Hour the previous evening for an early celebration of his birthday, and he'd had perhaps one too many. The potions would cure that, but he worried a bit about the state of his breath. That worry intensified greatly

when he found Fudge, Bones, and Umbridge waiting for him along with the entire senior staff.

"Well, what's got us all out of bed so early?" he grumbled.

Amelia merely looked at him disdainfully, but the Minister was jubilant.

"Why, a miracle, Chief Potter!" he exclaimed. "A verifiable miracle! And we owe it all to Senior Auror Thicknesse here!"

"... we do? Could you perhaps ... expand on that?"

James was rather nonplussed at the praise directed towards Pius Thicknesse. The man had been a good Auror if a bit stolid, but he'd not been James's first choice for the open Senior Auror slot created after his own promotion to Chief Auror. Not that James held a grudge over that time in Third Year when "Thicky McThickhead" had hexed him into the Infirmary for two days over a harmless prank. But Amelia had vetoed James's preferred nominees, and Cornelius had a soft spot for Pius due to a stint as one of his personal guards, so Senior Auror "Thicky" it was.

"Senior Auror Thicknesse," Amelia said with asperity. "Would you please repeat your summary briefing for Chief Potter's benefit."

"Yes, Director," Thicknesse said professionally. "Yesterday afternoon, I received a communication from a trusted confidential informant who provided a tip regarding the possible location of Fenrir Greyback and his pack. Acting on this information, my team Apparated to the coordinates provided - an abandoned farmhouse near Dunny-on-the-Wold in Suffolk - and set up surveillance. While the tip itself was accurate as to the time and location, it was incorrect in

one important detail. The provided location was not the base used by Greyback but rather his *next target*. It turns out that the farmhouse was, in fact, the base of operations for the individuals responsible for the July 31, 1993 Azkaban break-out. It seems that the werewolves had learned of this location and were planning to attack it in order to free the Death Eaters who were actually being held prisoner there by the very people who broke them out of jail!"

"What?!" James exploded in shock.

"Let the man finish, James," Fudge chided.

Thicknesse coughed politely in response to the glare Potter was now giving him. As Scrimgeour had predicted, the Chief Auror was angry at not having been brought into the loop earlier. Pius continued his report.

"Just before midnight, Greyback's entire pack, in the company of an unidentified wizard in a Death Eater uniform, Apparated to the same area and immediately summoned the Dark Mark over the house before commencing an attack against its wards. I made the command decision to first call for back-up and then intervene. As a result of fine work by the Aurors and hit wizards under my command, all the werewolves were either captured or killed with no injuries or casualties on our side, though the Death Eater unfortunately escaped. Apparently, he or she was an unregistered Animagus who transformed into a rat that was too small for us to target from the air."

With that last remark, James had a brief coughing fit, and he quickly reached for a glass of water as Thicknesse continued.



"We then turned our attention to the farmhouse, but before we could enter, there was a small explosion inside. This was apparently caused by a modified Portkey of the same type used to escape Azkaban, and the three individuals we had detected inside the farmhouse were able to flee *despite* being under the Anti-Portkey Jinx imposed by the Dark Mark! But more important was what they left behind: the comatose bodies of Rabastan Lestrangle, Rodolphus Lestrangle, and Augustus Rookwood; a corpse positively identified as belonging to Bellatrix Black-Lestrangle; and a set of Pensieve memories that ... well, I believe they speak for themselves."

Thicknesse nodded to one of the Junior Aurors who stood beside a Pensieve with a projector function. The Auror tapped his wand to the Pensieve which began to emit a bright light and the whole room changed around them.

"Amelia and I have already seen this, James," Fudge said somewhat pompously. "For everyone else, as Minister, I declare this information to be covered under the Official Secrets Act, and it is not to be discussed outside this room until an official statement is released later today. The memory has been confirmed as joint memories taken simultaneously from the Lestranges and then merged. The Unspeakables are still working to confirm that it has not been tampered with, but for now, we have no reason to doubt its authenticity."

Those assembled now found themselves in a nondescript room gathered around a small table. On one side sat the Lestrangle brothers. On the other sat two individuals who James recognized (as the result of a months' long investigation) as Muggle actors Elke Sommer and Burt Kwouk. Nearby, Auror Michael Proudfoot looked sick at the sight of the woman (if indeed she was a woman) who'd

seduced him as part of the Azkaban plot. The two began to read from a prepared statement, alternating paragraphs between them.

*"Our names are not important. All you need to know is that we are here to correct an injustice."*

*"We are the children of a man you may know as Marcellus Frump. That was not his true name, for he was a Metamorphmagus who concealed his status as such from the British government to avoid Conscription. He was from a Pureblood family, but not a Noble one, though he thought by serving You-Know-Who loyally, he could win such status for his family."*

*"To that end, he took the Dark Mark and became a secret Death Eater, using his powers to spy for You-Know-Who and to cause dissension and confusion. He served in a Death Eater cell along with Bellatrix, Rodolphus, and Rabastan Lestranger. Narcissa Malfoy was also a willing participant, though she did not go on raids. While he committed many crimes as a Death Eater, including framing Sirius Black for his crimes so that he could flee the country, our father repented of his sins later as he was dying of an untreatable magical illness. His last request was that we somehow find a way to exonerate Sirius Black."*

James sputtered loudly at that, but Amelia shushed him.

*"To that end, we have engaged in a plan several years in the making. We discovered that Gilderoy Lockhart, who was set to become the new Hogwarts DADA instructor, was a criminal who had used Memory Charms to steal the achievements of genuine heroes in order to improve his own reputation. We blackmailed him into helping us, but when we learned he was responsible for the petrification*

*attacks, we forced him to confess to his crimes and Obliviate himself with the Tabula Rasa curse. We learned the Tabula Rasa from an Australian wizard who supported our goals and who somehow mastered the curse without swearing any oaths not to share it."*

*"Afterwards, we made use of research performed by students - at Lockhart's direction but really for our benefit - to develop a plan to free Sirius Black from Azkaban and prove his innocence."*

The two memory-speakers shook their heads violently, and their faces changed from those of Kwouk and Sommer to James Potter and Cornelius Fudge. Rather amusingly, Minister Fudge was still wearing the dress that Elke Sommer had worn. Fudge grimaced in embarrassment at the sight, while Proudfoot looked physically ill. James seethed as he regarded his own doppelganger.

*"In these forms, we freed the Lestranges and Augustus Rookwood and then took them to a secret location for interrogation. We extracted memories from the three Lestranges that will confirm Black's innocence. As you will see in one of the memory extracts, the Death Eaters had access to a potion Augustus Rookwood stole from the Unspeakables that conceals the effects of Memory Charms. This was used to make James and Lily Potter falsely believe that Sirius Black was their Secret Keeper when it was actually **Peter Pettigrew**. We confirmed this from the memories of the Lestranges. We were unable to break the will of Rookwood, so we kept him in a comatose state for the duration of our work."*

*"It is our hope that he is irreparably insane as a result of his captivity."*

*"We were aided in our effort by a third sibling who was also a Metamorphmagus and who impersonated Auror Michael Proudfoot at Azkaban. Sadly, there was a breach in our security. Bellatrix Lestrange briefly escaped and killed our brother before being slain herself. We have Bellatrix's body in stasis. You will find her corpse along with the two Lestrange Brothers and Rookwood and these memory vials."*

*"Sirius Black is in a safe location recovering from his ordeal. He will be released when the Ministry acknowledges the truth: that he never had a trial and was falsely imprisoned. The trial transcript that sent him to Azkaban was actually from the secret trial of our father, who was captured before the destruction of You-Know-Who and interrogated under Veritaserum. He was freed by unknown DMLE employees either bribed or Imperius'd to do so, and then Narcissa Black-Malfoy, under the name Ariana McFlossy, seduced Herbert Cattermole and persuaded him to falsify the trial records so as to convict Sirius Black instead. We do not know her reasons for framing Black, but we assume she wanted him dead in disgrace so that her newborn son Draco might someday inherit the Black estate. Narcissa later murdered Cattermole while they were on their 'honeymoon' on the island of St. Cyprian. A copy of the McFlossy-Cattermole wedding certificate carrying Narcissa Black's magical signature will be included with the memory extracts. What we have told you about the McFlossy-Narcissa Black connection can be confirmed by speaking with the Chief Auror on St Cyprian."*

*"Naturally, if the British Ministry refuses to give Black a new trial and a chance to clear his name, we will instead help him to escape to another nation that has no extradition treaty with wizarding Britain, but we hope that*

*once you see the evidence collected, you will do the proper thing."*

At that, the memory ended, and the observers found themselves back in the conference room. By now, James was livid.

"What is this *utter nonsense*?!" he spat in a fury. "Of course, Sirius Black was our Secret Keeper!"

"Chief Auror," Amelia interrupted firmly. "The memory extracts found at the farmhouse are ... extensive. Several of them that we have already observed show an individual matching the description of Peter Pettigrew meeting with the Lestranges to discuss his efforts to insinuate himself back into your good graces as a spy in the months prior to You-Know-Who's attack on your family. And others show the individual who purports to be '*Marcellus Frump*' revealing himself as a Metamorphmagus who regularly posed as Sirius Black in order to get close to Wizengamot members and place them under the Imperius Curse."

"This is *insane*!" James shouted. "There was a *trial*! Black confessed to *everything* under Veritaserum!"

Then, from the doorway, someone coughed to draw everyone's attention. And to the surprise of those present, it was Albus Dumbledore.

"I do apologize for the interruption, but I couldn't help but overhear your discussion on account of the fact that I was listening to every word."

"Albus!" Fudge exclaimed. "You're supposed to be in Paris at the ICW!"

"I was. But I received a message about these shocking developments and thought that as Chief Warlock, I should be here in case I was needed. I plan to return to Paris as soon as possible, but if I am detained here, I'm sure Barty Crouch and Ludo Bagman can handle the negotiations in my absence. And as it happens, I believe I can shed light on the matter of Sirius Black's so-called trial."

"*So-called* trial?" Director Bones inquired.

"Yes. Rufus Scrimgeour is presently acting as Hogwarts' Professor for Defense Against the Dark Arts, and he has chosen to incorporate the history of the Death Eater movement into his lesson plans as part of the general topic of defending against dark wizards. A student assigned to review Sirius Black's career as a Death Eater discovered an interesting irregularity in his trial proceedings."

"What sort of irregularity?" asked Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"At the time the trial was supposedly held, all three of the judges were deceased."

The entire room went completely silent.

"Yep," Shacklebolt finally said. "That's an irregularity alright."

"I can also add that I ordered a search of the records for anyone named Marcellus Frump," added Thicknesse.

"There *was* a very large file opened on him in October of 1981, but at some point, the contents were removed by persons unknown. Analysis indicates the empty folder itself has definitely been there that long."

By this point, James looked completely shell-shocked, and Dumbledore spoke up.

"Cornelius, Amelia, could I perhaps speak to James in private? There's something he should know that relates to these affairs, but it is rather ... sensitive."

"Of course, Albus," the Minister said before gesturing for James to follow the old man from the room. Outside, the Headmaster set up a privacy Charm.

"Albus ...!"

"James, listen to me. I know this is hard for you to accept, but I now have very strong reason to believe that your memories as to the identity of your Secret Keeper may indeed have been altered."

"Impossible! I handle Remembralls *all the time*! Surely you don't believe that nonsense about a magic potion that hides Memory Charms?!"

"James," Albus said as he withdrew a potion vial from inside his robe. "That potion does exist. I am quite familiar with it. And *this* is the antidote. If you wish to know the truth, take it."

Now quite pale, James stared at the vial. "And if I'm *not* under this potion?"

"It will have no effect on you."

James thrust his jaw forward defiantly before snatching up the vial and tossing the contents back.

"Okay, I drank it. None of my memories have changed."

"Of course not, James," Dumbledore said almost sadly. "The potion only reverses the magic that hides the alterations from Remembralls."

With that, he held out his hand to James. And there was a tiny glass orb in his palm. James stared at the Remembrall almost in fear. Carefully, he reached out to take it.

It instantly turned red.

---

Moments later, Dumbledore reentered the conference room.

"I, er, hope none of you mind, but I advised James to go home. He is a bit overwhelmed by these revelations. But you should know that I have confirmed the allegations in the memory extracts that James's own memories about the Potter family Secret Keeper have been altered by use of an Unspeakable potion. I have just given him the antidote, and the false memory is now detectable by a Remembrall. I cannot predict how long it will take for the Remembrall to restore a true memory after so much time - perhaps a day, perhaps as long as a week - but at the moment, I fear he is too emotionally compromised to be of much use to the investigation."

Fudge waved his hand dismissively. "Oh, I quite agree. Terrible shock, I'm sure. Luckily, young Thicknesse here seems to have things well in hand."

Thicknesse nodded politely in response to the praise. Around the room, several of the other Aurors discretely looked to one another as they all contemplated the political ramifications of the last few hours.

"Relatedly," Albus continued. "In light of this new evidence, might I recommend that we rescind the Kiss on Sight order for Sirius Black? At least until the evidence is thoroughly vetted by the Unspeakables?"



"I agree," said Amelia. "We should also bring in Peter Pettigrew and Narcissa Black for questioning. Though, obviously, I would hold off on any formal accusations until after we've heard from them given the alarming number of Metamorphmagi running around. It wouldn't do for the Ministry to compound the errors made in the Black case."

Fudge nodded. "Quite so. Anything else?"

"Yes," Dumbledore said. "I should be very grateful if you removed the Dementors presently floating next to my school and returned them to Azkaban immediately."

"Yeeeeeess," Fudge said slowly. "Bit of a hiccup there, I'm afraid, Albus. We can't withdraw them until we've refilled the vacant cells in the Maximum-Security Wing at Azkaban. And the Unspeakables have requested that we delay returning the Lestranges and Rookwood to Azkaban until they have had an opportunity to examine them and see if this Tabula Rasa thingy has actually done its job, especially in the case of Rookwood. They also registered some concerns as to how Dementors will respond to prisoners with no personalities at all."

"Hem-hem." Dolores Umbridge nervously raised her hand. "Might I propose a compromise? In addition to the four Death Eaters, we also have Fenrir Greyback and three members of his pack. All of them are wanted for a variety of Azkaban-worthy crimes, and between their limited rights as werewolves and your powers as Praetor Maximus, I believe it would be permissible to sentence them immediately to Azkaban without a formal trial. That would satisfy the occupancy requirements that concern us and also have the benefit of getting four dangerous werewolves off British soil and into secure containment before tomorrow night's full moon."

Fudge's face brightened. "A capital idea, Dolores! Get me the paperwork, and I'll get those filthy beasts sent off at once! With luck, Albus, we can then get those Dementors removed before breakfast!"

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### ***The Office of Saul Croaker***

#### ***Soon after ...***

There was a soft knock at the door before Albus Dumbledore entered the office of the Voice of the Unspeakables.

"Saul, my dear fellow. I hope I'm not intruding."

Croaker crooked an eyebrow. He and Albus went way back, but neither man was big on social calls. And given what was scheduled to happen at Hogwarts the next day ....

"Not at all, Albus. Though it's looking to be a very busy day indeed. But when we last spoke, you said you'd be in Paris for the Tournament negotiations, didn't you?"

"As I told Cornelius," said Dumbledore as he slid into a chair, "I'm quite sure Barty Crouch and Ludo Bagman can handle the negotiations in my absence."

The Unspeakable snorted. "Barty Crouch is the sort of man who might start an international incident if he doesn't like the seating chart. And Ludo Bagman is the sort of man who might accidentally sell the whole of Britain to the French in exchange for a bag of magic beans and a sickly cow. What can I do for you, Albus? I'm quite busy right now, as I'm sure you know."

"Oh, I know quite well, Saul. I just wanted to pop in and see how your department was coming along with its analysis of

the memories recovered by the Aurors this morning."

Croaker's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"I am Chief Warlock, Saul. Am I not entitled to take an interest in seeing justice done fairly?"

The Unspeakable stared at Dumbledore as if trying to read his mind. Giving that up as an impossibility, he shrugged.

"There are a few ... oddities to the memories. They may be nothing. Or they may be signs of fakery. We'll need more time before we can say definitively."

"I see. Well, my friend, I shouldn't spend *too* long in your analysis. I think the public is crying out for a sense of closure and finality in these affairs, and events are moving very quickly now." He tilted his head slightly. "*Tempus fugit*, as they say."

Croaker gave no visible sign that the phrase had any special meaning. But he did *stare* at the Headmaster for quite a long time before speaking again, and the other man returned his gaze just as intently.

"Yes ... well, I suppose the ... *minor* inconsistencies we've found are probably nothing. Certainly not enough to justify a delay in giving the Minister the assurances he wants."

"Splendid! I'll let him know your report is on its way soon."

Croaker nodded. "I'm still planning on ... dropping by the school on Friday. Will you be there?"

Dumbledore looked thoughtful. "I honestly have no idea, Saul. I suppose we'll both see what Fate has in store over the coming days, won't we?"

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**Potter Manor****5:00 a.m.**

"PETER! PETER! WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU!" James Potter continued to scream into the mirror his closest friend had given him many years before. But there was no reply.

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**The Apartment of Yvette Dubois****5:30 a.m.**

The pretty young secretary swiftly pulled on a robe over her satin pajamas as she raced to the door to see who was knocking so forcefully and at such an ungodly hour. She threw open the door and was shocked to see her employer, Peter Pettigrew, standing in the hallway of her apartment in muddy clothes and looking very much the worse for wear. In his hand was a hefty carpetbag.

"Sacre bleu!" she exclaimed, her surprise drawing her French accent to the surface. "I mean, what is eet, Monsieur Pettigrew? Whatever 'as 'appened?"

"Something dreadful, Yvette," the man said gravely. "I'm sorry to come to your home at such an hour, but I need your assistance quite desperately."

"But of course! Come in, come in."

The solicitor entered the flat, and Yvette closed the door behind him. He stepped over to the nearby dining table and dropped the carpetbag onto it. While no sounds emerged from it, the rough fabric of the bag began to shift, as if there were some living thing squirming about inside it. Or perhaps *many* living things.

"Um, Monsieur Pettigrew? Forgive me, but ... what ees in ze bag?"

Peter smiled as he raised his wand. "Yeah, that's sort of what I need your assistance with. **IMPERIO!**"

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### ***The Great Hall Breakfast***

As the students of Hogwarts waited impatiently for breakfast to be served, they were (for the most part) surprised by the presence of Headmaster Dumbledore, apparently back early from his ICW meeting in Paris. Indeed, only one student in the entire room was *not* surprised by said appearance, as he'd been the one to summon Dumbledore the night before. The Headmaster rose and tapped his spoon against a glass to draw everyone's attention.

"Good morning, students. I have a few announcements to make. While the Daily Prophet will undoubtedly explain things more thoroughly and in lurid detail, I wish to be the first to inform you that the Dementors who had been our undesired guests these many months have been withdrawn and are on their way back to their post at Azkaban."

Immediately, the students erupted in loud applause.

"The reason for this withdrawal is simple: the prisoners whose escape from Azkaban led to their presence here were themselves captured early this morning by several courageous Aurors and other DMLE personnel. Furthermore, I am happy to announce that the werewolf pack of Fenrir Greyback which attacked Hogsmeade last October has also been brought to justice. I deeply regret that you all had to suffer the unpleasantness of the

Dementors' presence and, worse, the horror of the werewolf attack. And so, considering these positive developments, I am allowing a special school treat. First, classes for today and tomorrow are cancelled."

Even wilder applause.

"Second, in the aftermath of the Halloween attacks, many of our students who would otherwise have been eligible for Hogsmeade privileges have not been permitted them. To celebrate the conclusion of the Azkaban crisis, the Ministry has declared that tomorrow will be a day of celebration in Hogsmeade complete with a speech by the Minister of Magic, and we will be holding an unscheduled Hogsmeade Visit for *all* students, regardless of year, to allow you to observe."

The applause turned into outright cheers. Then, as if they'd been waiting on the Headmaster to finish his address, a large flock of post owls flew in through the open windows and delivered a special edition of the *Daily Prophet* along with the morning mail. The blaring headlines confirmed the Headmaster's announcement with all the bombast one might expect from the paper.

***DEATH EATER MENACE ENDED THANKS TO BRAVE AURORS!***

***DEMENTORS TO BE WITHDRAWN!***  
***IS SIRUS BLACK INNOCENT?***

The accompanying front page story was every bit as exciting as the headline promised. Rita Skeeter covered the fight between the Aurors and the werewolves and also presented a glowing interview with Pius Thicknesse which promised to make the Senior Auror a national hero. Andrew Smudgely tackled the tale of the Azkaban escapees and the

strange story of Marcellus Frump and his shape-shifting offspring. Smudgely's article also touched on the apparent innocence of Sirius Black and included a plea from Minister Fudge for Black to turn himself in so that the claims made in the memories could be verified and he could be fully exonerated. To Harry's annoyance, the article did *not* specifically mention either Peter Pettigrew or Narcissa Malfoy by name, though Auror Thicknesse did mention in his interview that one person in Death Eater robes accompanied Greyback's pack and that Aurors had suspects who were being sought for questioning.

As the news circulated through the student body, no one noticed as Jim Potter took a small envelope from a very small owl and stuffed it into his pocket to read later. Likewise, no one noticed that at one point during breakfast, the Headmaster made eye contact with Harry Potter from across the room for several seconds, after which the boy nodded once before returning to his meal.

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### ***Meanwhile, at Nott Hall ...***

"Marcellus Frump?!" Tiberius Nott exclaimed in complete confusion. "Who the hell is he supposed to be?!"

Rogo, the Death Eater's long-suffering house elf, had no answer for his master. Nor were any answers to be found in the dozen or so households across the country where wizards and witches who had been acquitted of serving the Dark Lord on falsified Imperius defenses were reading the same newspaper article with equal bewilderment.

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### ***Later, in the Headmaster's office ...***

As soon as breakfast was done, Harry deftly avoided all his friends and quickly made his way to the Headmaster's Office. After he gave the password ("Jelly Babies"), the gargoyle allowed him up the staircase. Dumbledore called out "Enter!" before the boy could even knock.

"Good morning, sir," Harry said genially once inside the office. "I take it last night was a productive one?"

"I suppose that's one word for it. The Dementors are gone, and the Azkaban Crisis appears mostly resolved. However, both Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew are still at large, and *one* of them was the former Secret Keeper who betrayed your family in 1981. Also, and perhaps relatedly, I seem to have misplaced my Caretaker. Can you shed any light on that?"

Harry winced. He had rather callously *used* Remus Lupin in order to draw Pettigrew into a trap. But it seemed clear that Pettigrew had no interest in harming the werewolf who he truly considered a close friend. Most likely, Remus was still in Pettigrew's custody and still under Draught of Living Death. And if Pettigrew wasn't captured first, Harry had an unpleasant suspicion as to where the man might be found later.

"Not currently, Headmaster. But I'm confident that he's safe and will come to no harm."

Dumbledore nodded slowly.

"I may hold you to that, Mr. Potter. So ... is there anything else you require of me? I understand the constraints you are under as we discussed briefly last night in your room."

Harry considered the question even as he recalled that very interesting conversation.



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***The previous night in Harry's room***  
***1:15 a.m.***

It had been only a few minutes since Harry had sent his Patronus to Paris in order to deliver a message to Albus Dumbledore. Idly, he wondered how long it took Patronuses to travel when used for this purpose. The answer was apparently "not long," as Harry realized when a brilliant golden bonfire erupted at the foot of his bed! After a second, the flames receded to reveal Dumbledore himself, still in a bathrobe haphazardly pulled on over a flannel nightgown, with Fawkes perched on his shoulder.

"Good evening, Mr. Potter. Or perhaps I should say, good morning!"

"And, uh, good morning to you, Professor," Harry said after regaining his composure. "Thank you for coming so swiftly."

"Of course. Though I hope the events in play justify this late-night journey." The old man hesitated for a moment. "Then again, perhaps I hope they *don't*. Regardless, your Patronus – and a most impressive specimen it is, by the way – said only that '*some things have happened back here in Britain*' that demand my attention."

"Yes sir," said Harry.

"You also said '*tempus fugit*.' May I ask why you used those particular words, Mr. Potter?"

"Because you told me once that if I ever really truly needed you, I should send a Patronus message to you using those words."

"Ah. Did I now. And when, may I ask, did I tell you that?"

"Tomorrow morning, sir."

"Of course. How prescient of me." Dumbledore shrugged, apparently taking that answer in stride. "Very well. Mr. Potter, please tell me as clearly and *succinctly* as possible: What do you think I should be doing right now? And what, if anything, should I *not* be doing?"

Harry's eyebrows rose in surprise at those questions. He'd had a feeling that the seemingly all-knowing Headmaster would, of course, know *something* about the Time-Turner based on their last conversation in the prior timeline. But Dumbledore's words seemed to imply greater knowledge than Harry had anticipated, as well as noticeable *caution* about using his influence to change things. The boy considered the questions carefully.

"Well, I think the most pressing business is at the Ministry. You see, most of the Azkaban escapees have been captured, but ...."

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### ***Dumbledore's Office***

#### ***The Present***

Harry considered the man's question and started to respond. Then, he stopped suddenly before he could utter a single word. Dumbledore stared at him expectantly. Harry stared back. Then, Harry tried again.

"I don't *think* your continued presence here in Britain is needed right now, Headmaster," he finally said in an unusually deliberate voice.

Inwardly, Harry fumed. He personally thought there were quite a few things the Headmaster could help with since Pettigrew was still at large. If nothing else, Harry did not

relish the thought of facing a raging werewolf again. But the impulse, *the urge*, to send the Headmaster away was too strong. For some reason, now that Dumbledore had put his imprimatur on the Marcellus Frump hoax and effectively cleared Sirius, the magic of the Time-Turner wanted him *gone*.

Dumbledore nodded. "I still have a meeting with your mother. Your father has already taken the antidote to the Unspeakable's potion, and the Remembrall I gave him will restore his memories soon. I will persuade Lily to do likewise. She may wish to speak to you and Jim about it sometime thereafter."

The boy's eye twitched slightly. His relationship with Lily was much better than James by far, but he really had too much to do right now to get drawn into Potter emotional drama.

"After that," Dumbledore continued. "I shall return to Paris and hopefully rescue our negotiations from whatever disaster Crouch and Bagman have wrought."

"Good luck, Headmaster," the boy said.

"And to you, my boy. Though I fear you may need luck far more than I."

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***Peter Pettigrew's Apartment***  
***9:40 a.m.***

It had been several hours since Peter abandoned his apartment after leaving a "welcoming present" for Sirius Black. But it was not Black who arrived at the apartment first. Instead, it was a squad of five DMLE hit wizards. The term *hit wizard* was a neologism, with "hit" standing for

"Hazardous Incident Team." Hit wizards were ordinary field agents for the DMLE, as opposed to the far more prestigious Auror Corps. While not a precise fit, a Muggleborn might be forgiven for comparing hit wizards to ordinary beat cops and Aurors to MI5 or the American FBI. And while hit wizards are generally brave and effective law enforcement agents, the fact remains that all Aurors are expected to have a minimum of five NEWTs at EE or higher while hit wizards are merely expected to have five or more OWLS with passing grades and no requirements for NEWT-level education.

All of which explains why it is no slight against a hit wizard to note that he is often completely unprepared to face a truly dangerous dark wizard.

After the knock at the door went unanswered, the hit wizards kicked it in and entered the apartment searching for Pettigrew. And so focused were they on looking for any sign of the wizard, they did not even consider other possible dangers. One of the hit wizards moved around the coffee table in the living room. To his credit, he was not so foolish as to *touch* the tin box that Pettigrew had left behind for Sirius Black to find, but unfortunately, only proximity was required. The crank on the side of the box began to turn itself, and the soft sounds of the last five notes of "Pop Goes the Weasel" played.

The hit wizard turned towards the source of the music just in time to see the lid pop open. Instantly, a "snake" made of ratty green cloth over a coiled spring shot out with a loud "*BOING!*" It had a cartoonish face with large comical "googly" eyes that spun wildly. The snake's emergence startled the wizard, causing him to shout an expletive and alerting the other hit wizards who moved closer.

And then, in an obnoxiously high-pitched voice, the snake began *to laugh*.

*"Ho-ho-ho-ho-HEE! Ho-ho-ho-ho-HEE!"*

"What the h-hell is th-th-is, hehehe!" the lead wizard tried to say before being overcome by a fit of giggles.

"It's s-s-s-some kind hahaha of curse hahaha!" said a second hit wizard as her mouth stretched into a broad grin that belied the sudden fear in her eyes.

Another hit wizard tried to disable the snake-in-a-box with a spell. "F-f-finite Incanta-HAHAHAHA!"

The closest wizard lashed out with his arm to knock the box off the table. It landed on the floor several feet away but continued to bray in obnoxious mirth.

*"Ho-ho-ho-ho-HEE! Ho-ho-ho-ho-HEE!"*

By now, all five hit wizards were under the sway of one of Erasmus Wilkes's infamous "toys," and as one, they all dropped to their knees and then all the way to the floor, incapable of any actions save clutching their bellies that were already aching from their uncontrollable hideous laughter. And they would continue to howl in terrified amusement for quite some time, long after the enchanted box itself went silent. Long after the strain on their throats had rendered their laughter as silent as it was hysterical.

And long after their commitment to St Mungo's.

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***Hogwarts  
The Great Hall  
10:30 a.m.***

"Hey Marcus!" Harry called out to his friend. The boy had been waiting near the front entrance for five minutes, and Marcus Flint was right on time.

"Morning, Harry. What's up?" asked Hogwarts' only Eighth Year student as he looked around at the students milling casually in the halls. "I, um, read the *Prophet* this morning...?" he began uncertainly.

"Then, I'm sure you know that the missing Death Eaters minus Sirius Black have been recovered by the Ministry," Harry responded quickly. "One less thing for us to worry about, I guess," he added pointedly.

Marcus nodded. "Good news. So, what's everyone doing out of class?"

"Classes are canceled today and tomorrow. Of course, with the Dementors gone, I don't even know if they're going to continue with Patronus lessons anyway, but you're definitely free for today."

Marcus's face lit up in a smile. "Awesome! I'm heading to London this weekend for the holidays. This means I can get a jump on packing."

"Going alone?" Harry asked innocently.

Marcus blushed. "Not that it's any of your business, Potter. But I'm going with Emily Rossum. Perhaps when you're older and more mature, you'll understand such things."

"Oh, you'll find I understand all kind of things. I'm very knowledgeable for my age. Speaking of which, why don't you go pack now and then head up to London this afternoon!"

Marcus looked at Harry suspiciously. "And why would I go up to London ahead of schedule when I don't even have a place to stay up there until Saturday?"

"*Because* if you go to London today and drop by my solicitor's office, you *might* find he has something for you."

"What kind of *something*?"

Harry shrugged. "Most likely a round-trip Portkey for you and a guest for a two-week stay at a luxury hotel in Le Quartier Magique in Paris."

Marcus's eyes goggled in surprise. "Uhhh ... what?!"

"Marcus, you've been a friend since I was a Firstie. I heard through one of my many and varied sources of information that you and Emily were getting closer, and I want to do something nice for you both."

"Merlin, Potter! I mean, I'm grateful, but you didn't have to do that!"

"No, but I wanted to, and I can afford it. *But* I'm afraid you'll need to pick up the Portkey today or I've wasted all that money for nothing. So, I'd be very grateful if you'd get out of here now."

The two Slytherins continued talking for a few minutes, and Marcus was clearly touched by Harry's generosity. For his part, Harry was just relieved when Marcus finally accepted the gift that would ensure he would be well away from Hogwarts grounds as soon as possible. And as a jubilant Marcus Flint headed back out the front doors with a spring in his step, Harry mentally checked another item off his "to-do list."

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***The Third Floor of Hogwarts***  
***Near the statue of Gunhilda of Gorsemoore***  
***12:30 p.m.***

Hidden beneath the Potter Invisibility Cloak, Jim looked around to make sure no one was nearby before casting a quick Tempus. Then, following his godfather's instructions, he tapped his wand against the hump on the statue of an ugly witch that adorned this hallway and whispered "*Dissendium*." The statue slid to one side, revealing a passageway through which a brown rat quickly scampered.

Jim, who had never seen Peter in his Animagus form, grimaced. "I hope you're really Uncle Pete and not just an ordinary rat. I don't want to get fleas."

The rat squeaked an indignant response, and a disembodied arm appeared in midair from underneath the cloak to carefully pick it up. Soon, the arm and the rat disappeared again.

A few moments later, Jim ducked into an empty classroom, whipped off his cloak, and gently placed the rat on the floor. A second later, Pettigrew stood in its place.

"Well done, Sport!" Pettigrew said as he pulled his godson into a warm hug. "I'm very proud of you!"

Jim snorted. "All I did was open a passage, Uncle Pete. It wasn't that impressive. But can you please tell me what's going on? Is Sirius Black innocent? But Dad says he was our Secret Keeper!"

Peter placed a reassuring arm on the boy's shoulder. "I can't tell you everything, Sport, because I don't know everything. Have ... have you been in contact with your father? Has anyone talked to you ... about me?"



The boy shook his head in confusion. "No. What *about* you?"

"Jim ... sport. You know I love you, right? As if you were my own?"

"O-of course, Uncle Pete! But what is it? Tell me what's going on!"

"I will, sport. But first, I need to ...." Peter gasped suddenly and looked over Jim's shoulder at the door on the far side of the room. "What's that?!" he whispered urgently.

Jim turned quickly but saw nothing. Then, he turned back to his godfather... just in time to see the flash of red.

**"STUPEFY!"**

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***The Corridor leading to the Divination Classroom***  
***2:45 p.m.***

"Dooooom!"

Trelawney placed her hand over her mouth in shock. "Oh, my dear child. Yes, yes, of course. You cannot ignore your Inner Eye when it gives warnings of such clarity. You dare not. And now that you mention it, I too can see the tendrils of fate whirling about you, warning of the same dangers that you have seen."

"Thank you for understanding, Professor," Hermione said with as much sincerity as she could muster.

*"Honestly, I don't know how Harry and Blaise do it!"* she thought to herself.

"Good luck to you, Miss Granger."

With that, Sibyll Trelawney turned and headed on to the ladder leading up to her classroom, while Hermione turned away, relieved at last to have that complication to her life over with. But then, before she'd gone more than a few feet, Trelawney suddenly called out to her again.

"Miss Granger!"

Hermione turned back to see Trelawney, now with an odd unreadable expression on her face.

"Yes, Professor?"

The woman took a few steps towards her while looking around as if to make sure no one was listening in. Then, she slipped her glasses down and looking at her over the rim.

"Miss Granger ... just between us ... are you truly... *truly* ... a *Seer*?"

Hermione was taken aback by the question and by the intensity of the look Professor Trelawney was giving her. To the girl's surprise, it was the most alert and thoughtful expression she'd ever seen on the woman's face. She bit her lip before answering truthfully.

"I ... don't think so, Professor. I'm sorry, but I really don't think I am."

Trelawney nodded. "I thought not. But ... has it *helped* you? That so many people thought you might be? Has it ... made some things easier?"

Hermione furrowed her brow at the unexpected question. "I ... maybe, in some ways."

The older witch sighed almost in relief. "Good, good. And, for what it's worth ... I'm glad you're not a Seer. Not that I would be jealous. No, no, not at all. It's just that ...."

She pulled off her thick glasses and rubbed them nervously with her shawl while she struggled for words.

"I ... I drink ... a lot, you know?"

Hermione was speechless at the unexpected confession.

"I know I shouldn't but ... it stops most of it from getting through. When I was younger, it happened all the time. Trivial things mostly, but it *just never stopped*. But now, if I drink enough sherry – and act foolish enough, I suppose – it leaves me alone most of the time."

"... I'm ... sorry to hear that, Professor," Hermione said slowly as she was completely unprepared for this odd conversation.

"Thank you, my child but ... it is what it is. Now, run along, my dear. And good fortune to you!"

"Er, thank you, Professor." Hermione turned and walked away as she processed what the woman had said. She'd made it to halfway down the corridor when Sibyll Trelawney spoke again.

"It will happen tonight ...."

"I'm sorry, what ...?" Hermione said as she turned back. Then, she gasped and froze in shock.

Trelawney's eyes had gone *white*, and her hair whirled about her head as if it had come alive. A sudden wave of

unnatural coldness washed over Hermione, and she found herself unable to move.

All she could do was bear witness.

*It will happen tonight.  
With all obstacles removed,  
the Prince will claim the Throne of Basalt and Silver.  
Though he is blameless, yet shall his actions be  
as the beating of the butterfly's wings  
as they unleash the mightiest hurricane.*

*By his choices shall the greatest of the Dark Lord's  
servants  
be freed and the circle forged anew.  
The Dark Lord will be reborn in all his terrible glory.  
Betrayal. Blood. Terror. Destruction. Death.  
And finally, the Cold Flame that consumes all.  
Until at last, the Question is asked, and the Decision is  
made:*

*Our story has been told before. But will it ever be told  
again?*

"Wh-what did you say?" Hermione finally said in a fearful voice. Meanwhile, the woman's hair finally settled down, and her eyes returned to their normal color. She blinked a few times before noticing Hermione still standing before her.

"I said *good fortune*, my child. Now then, run along with you, and enjoy your holidays!"

"... th-thank you, Professor. Y-you as well."

As the Divination instructor turned back towards the ladder to her classroom, Hermione slowly turned and continued

down the hall. As soon as she made it around the corner, she broke out into a run.

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***Twenty minutes later ...***

"Our story has been told before. But will it ever be told again?" Harry repeated thoughtfully. "What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?"

"I'm sure I've no idea, Harry," Hermione said testily. "If you'll recall, I thought Divination was complete fakery until today! What do *you* think it means?"

Harry grimaced as he considered the first lines of this new Prophecy – the part about the Prince claiming the Throne of Basalt and Silver, which was a disturbingly accurate description of the Hydra Throne.

"It's okay, Hermione. I think it ties in with ... the Something-  
Something. But I know what it is. And ... I know how to avoid it. I'll make sure this Prophecy doesn't come true."

"Just like that?" Hermione asked dubiously. "You know how to avert a True Prophecy?"

"Yes," Harry answered ruefully. "Because here's the thing. In the prior timeline, *Trelawney didn't give this Prophecy!* Or if she did, you never revealed it to me, which seems unlikely, all things considered. You told me I might lose something important as a price for coming back. But if she didn't make the Prophecy before, then it must be something I didn't have and wouldn't be getting in that timeline. That can only mean one thing."

He faced Hermione with a look of fierce determination.

"And while I'm not *happy* about it, it's a sacrifice I'm

prepared to make."

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***The Prince's Lair***  
***3:30 p.m.***

"And so here we are. In the past day, I have learned of not one but *two* True Prophecies that indicate my becoming Prince of Slytherin might be a triggering event for some kind of dreadful wizarding disaster. And I cannot in good conscience risk something like that. I want you to know that I am grateful, truly grateful for the opportunities you have given me since we first met, particularly since I know I am so much younger than most applicants. Your counsel and encouragement have been invaluable to me. And more than anything, I wanted to prove myself worthy of your faith in me. To be worthy to sit on the Throne. To have the chance to serve Slytherin House as the Founder would have wanted. But Salazar Slytherin himself would have agreed that there are some things more important than personal ambition. I cannot pursue the role of Prince if doing so risks the future not just of the House but of ... everything. And so, with the utmost respect, I hereby formally withdraw my name as a candidate for Prince of Slytherin and renounce my claim to the Hydra Throne."

A heavy silence fell as the nine heads of the Hydra Throne regarded the boy. Despite his best efforts, he could not begin to guess what the serpents were thinking nor how they would respond to his announcement. Even Delilah simply stared at him with an expression more serious than he'd ever seen on the loquacious Boomslang before. Finally, Rajah spoke.

"You are resolved upon this course of action? You will not reconsider?"

"I will not," Harry answered.

"Then leave us," the great Basilisk said coldly.

Harry nodded and looked around the room to take in the sight of it before leaving the Prince's Lair for what he assumed would be the last time.

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***Severus Snape's personal laboratory***  
***4:30 p.m.***

Peter stuffed the complete formula for Damocles Belby's Wolfsbane Formula into his coat pocket along with the sample meant for Remus Lupin, which the Animagus had transferred to an unbreakable glass vial. Then, he turned back to Severus Snape who sat tied to a chair, his eyes glassy with Veritaserum, for one final question.

"Tell me, Snivellus, with the stuff you currently have on the boil in here, what ingredients do you have lying around that I could add to a potion that would produce deadly toxic fumes while giving myself time enough to get away?"

"The Potion of Dreamless Sleep in the third cauldron. Dump the aconite in and turn the burner up to maximum. When the potion comes to a boil, it will be quite deadly to any who breath the fumes."

"Thank you, Snivellus. It's always good to receive advice from a true professional."

Then, Pettigrew stunned Snape once more before following his directions to the letter. In the floor nearby was a sluice grate for pouring out failed potions. The bars were too close for a person to fit through, but just the right size for a rat.

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## ***The Hogwarts Foyer***

***5:00 p.m.***

Harry was headed to the Great Hall for dinner when he caught sight of Marcus Flint standing in the foyer. Flint made brief eye contact with him before heading out the main door. Cautiously, Harry followed. Sure enough, Flint was waiting for him on the front porch of the castle.

"What is it?" Harry asked. "I figured you'd already be in London by now."

Flint looked around carefully. "Something came up that I needed to talk to you about. It involves Peter Pettigrew ... and Professor Snape!"

Harry stared at the other Slytherin. "... go on," he said cautiously.

"I just saw both of them heading that way." Flint frowned while pointing around the side of the building. "Well, I say together. Snape was walking in front with Pettigrew close behind."

Harry studied the older Slytherin for a moment. "Show me," he finally said.

Once around the corner, Harry saw there was no sign of Pettigrew or Snape, but in the distance, he could see the Whomping Willow. With a sick feeling in his stomach, he noticed that it was stilled for once, but it began to thrash around when he drew close. Harry took a deep breath.

"Okay," he said. "There's a way to calm the tree down and also to open up a secret passage at the bottom. But what is it?"



"There's a knot at the bottom you have to either press or hit with a Stunner," Flint supplied.

Harry tensed. "How did you know ...?"

**"STUPEFY."**

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### ***Later in the Shrieking Shack ...***

Harry woke after being Renervated, and he was completely unsurprised to find himself tied up and wandless in the Shrieking Shack. The surprise came when he noticed in whose company he now found himself. Peter Pettigrew was present, looking down at him with a sneer. Marcus Flint stood nearby with a vacant expression. But this time, James Potter was nowhere to be found.

Instead, he was joined by *Jim and Lily Potter*.

"Uh-oh," he muttered quietly as he suppressed his sudden worry over this new scenario.

"Uncle Pete?" Jim said groggily. "What's ... what's going on?"

"What's going on, Jim," Lily Potter said coldly, "is that your godfather is betraying us! Again!"

"Ah, you've recovered your memories, I take it?"

"Not yet," she spat. "But the Headmaster told me about the proof against you that the Aurors discovered, and he also broke the spell that hid your Memory Charm from discovery. I was looking for Jim to warn him when you caught me."

"How did you get her and Jim here anyway?" Harry interrupted. "I know you Imperiused Marcus and sent him after me."

"Jim helpfully agreed to meet with me and let me borrow the Potter Cloak, at which point I stunned him and brought him here. Then, I used it to pay a little visit to Severus Snape before going after Lily. Along the way, I saw Marcus Flint preparing to leave the school, and I knew he'd be an ideal catspaw for capturing you. Easy Peasy!"

"Peter?" Lupin said weakly from across the room. "What ... you drugged me?"

"Yes, my friend, I did. Though I promise it was for your own good ... Remus." Pettigrew stopped abruptly in surprise.

"How interesting! I can say Remus's name! I know Jim here knew the Secret, and I'm not surprised to learn that Lily knew it. But I'm curious as to how you found out, Harry."

"Slytherin cunning," Harry deadpanned. Peter snorted in response.

"Will somebody please tell me what's going on?!" Jim exclaimed.

"Sure, Jim," Harry spat angrily. "Your godfather's *the bad guy*." Then, he glanced at Pettigrew's arm with a speculative expression. "I bet you even have a Dark Mark you've been concealing all these years."

Pettigrew smirked before taking off his jacket and rolling up his sleeve. "Long ago, I made *a choice*. And I have never once regretted it."

As he spoke those last words, a tattoo of the Dark Mark slowly materialized on his arm. Jim gasped in shock, while Lily just glared.

"You ... you were a Death Eater?" Remus said disbelievingly.

"Yes, Remus," he said smugly. "And it's a good thing for you I was! You were a decent spy, but not a great one. At my request, however, Fenrir Greyback overlooked your lapses and ensured that none of the other werewolves ever found you out."

His expression changed to one of genuine affection. "You're my best friend, Remus, and I would never have let you come to harm."

"Obviously, you didn't feel that way about James, did you Peter?" Lily said. "If what Albus said is true, you were our Secret Keeper back in 1981. And you led Voldemort *right to us*. So much for the Marauders' bonds of friendship!"

Pettigrew flinched at Voldemort's name, but his expression grew into an amiable grin at the mention of *friendship*.

"Truth be told, Lily," Peter said, "The Marauders were *never* friends. Not really. Remus and I were friends. James and Sirius were friends, albeit in a mutually self-destructive way. I honestly don't think James Potter ever really had anything even *close* to a genuine friend or would even know what a real friend was if he'd had one."

He crooked an eyebrow at Lily. "To be honest, I could never understand what you saw in him. Or did you finally wake up and notice how much money he had?"

"Stop it, Uncle Pete!" Jim shouted as he grew increasingly distraught. Harry interrupted before Peter could respond in

order to keep the conversation on a familiar track.

"How did you become Secret Keeper, anyway?"

"It was quite easy," Peter said merrily. "I tricked Sirius into thinking that I was the best choice for Secret Keeper because no one would suspect a '*pathetic little weakling*' like me. And then, Sirius persuaded both James and Lily to make the switch to me without telling anyone else. It was all I could do not to laugh. Of course, I had to improvise quickly when Jim here vanquished the Dark Lord. Luckily, I had a supply of the Unspeakable Potion I'd gotten from Mr. Nemo to hide the Memory Charms I cast on both of your parents."

He turned to Lily. "I gather Albus has already revealed that little trick, hasn't he, Lily. Oh well." Then, he laughed cruelly. "You and James could have handled Remembralls every day for a hundred years and never detected my alterations. After that, I just counted on James's natural vindictiveness! Heh! You should have seen the look on Sirius's face when he realized what I'd done!"

Peter shook his head as if recalling a fond memory while Jim and Remus looked on in shock.

"And then," Harry continued, "after you helped send Sirius to Azkaban, you kept on manipulating James. Getting him to finance your Law Mastery. To make you Seneschal and Proxy for House Potter. To give you more influence over The-Boy-Who-Lived."

"Quite so, Harry. It was easy. Your father's very gullible, after all. And by that point, I was the only friend he had left to stand beside him after Sirius's '*shocking betrayal*.'"

"No! That's insane!" Remus sputtered. "You were a *good person*. I know you weren't faking that during all the years

of our friendship. I cannot believe that you would abandon the Marauders and turn evil over something like that."

"But you see, Remus, *that's the thing!*" Pettigrew said excitedly. "That's what I learned! What I need to make *you* understand! *That there is no good! There is no evil!* There is only ...."

"Power," Harry interrupted snidely. "Power and those too weak to seek it."

Peter's eyes rose in surprise. "You're familiar with that saying?"

Harry gazed intently at the betrayer and recalled how the conversation had flowed the last time. He wasn't sure how things would play out with the unexpected cast changes, but he would need to guide events as closely as possible to the prior timeline if everyone was going to make it out alive.

"Yeah, it's the motto of Emeric the Evil. Voldemort himself quoted it to me when I was a First Year, just a few minutes before Jim here set him on fire. And I'll say to you what I said to your Lord: Did you know that those were among Emeric's last words just before his execution?"

Peter's face darkened almost angrily. But then, the anger passed, and he suddenly grinned infectiously. "Why yes, Harry, I did indeed know that!"

Then, he tilted his head and pointed a finger at the boy. "And since we're trading trivia questions about the greatest Dark Lord in history - did *you* know that Emeric the Evil ... *had a daughter?*"

"... go on."

Peter began to pace around the room as if delivering a lecture.

"While Emeric Belasco was being frog-marched through the Veil of Death by people who weren't fit to polish his wand – literally or figuratively – Lucretia Belasco was fleeing the country with as much gold and dark objects as she could fit into an expanding bag, along with all of Emeric's grimoires. She made her way to Bavaria under a false identity and married her way into a prominent wizarding family by the name of Kleinwuchs."

He looked around expectantly. "Anybody recognize *that* name from Binns's boring lectures?"

Harry said nothing, but Remus and Lily both looked up at Pettigrew in horror. "Peter ... *no* ... it can't be!" the werewolf said.

"Oh, I'm afraid it can, Remus. Under Lucretia's guidance and that of her carefully educated descendants, the Kleinwuchs family grew from minor Germanic nobility to one of the preeminent Houses in Europe ... and one of the darkest. Their power lasted for centuries until the House was wiped out during the Grindelwald conflict. The last survivor was a dark wizard by the name of Gustav Kleinwuchs ... who was also my grandfather!"

He looked around the room. "Anyone recognize *that* name?"

"Gustav Kleinwuchs," Harry recited calmly. "Grindelwald's highest-ranking lieutenant. AKA the Butcher of Silesia and the Death Wolf. A notoriously deranged war criminal. He was believed to have died at Dresden, but I suppose that was too much to hope for."

"Indeed," Peter replied. "Most of the Kleinwuchs family died in that attack, but Gustav and his youngest son survived. Gustav had truly only served Grindelwald because he believed Grindelwald possessed the Elder Wand that had once been wielded by Emeric until his fall. He'd planned to betray Grindelwald and reclaim the family's greatest treasure when the time was right, but Dumbledore defeated Grindelwald before he had the chance. By that point, the Allied victory seemed inevitable, so he defected instead."

Harry's brow furrowed as a thought occurred to him  
"Defected to whom?"

"To *whom*. Heh. Good grammar. I appreciate that."  
Pettigrew said smugly. "And who do you think would help a wanted war criminal emigrate to Britain and set him and his son up with fake identities? *The Unspeakables*, of course. They were willing to overlook his ... indiscretions in exchange for all of his research notes from his work during the War."

Peter turned to Lupin. "I doubt Damocles Belby ever knew it, but the basis for that potion that you've been taking all these months was borne of my grandfather's work in the werewolf detention camps in Poland. In exchange for all that occult lore, the Unspeakables smuggled my grandfather and father into Britain and set them up with new identities: the Pettigrews, George and Martin, refugees from the evil Grindelwald's campaign of destruction. And to help them integrate into British wizarding society – and, I suppose, make sure my Grandfather didn't get any *ideas* they found objectionable – they assigned a young, newly-initiated Unspeakable by the name of Augustus Rookwood to be their handler."

Pettigrew barked out another laugh. "I'm told it took Grandfather less than two months to win Rookwood's loyalty away from the Unspeakables."

"And now, Rookwood's back in custody and on his way back to Azkaban," Harry said with grim satisfaction. "What a tragedy."

Peter glared at him angrily. "For the moment. I still don't know who the hell broke him out of Azkaban or why. But if he's back at DMLE headquarters, then by a stroke of luck, I know someone who can free him and bring him here. That is, if he ever wants to see his wife and sons again."

"My father will never help you!" Jim spat angrily even as tears rolled down his cheeks.

"We'll see, sport."

"What did you do to Professor Snape?" Harry interrupted suddenly. "I assume you went after him to get the Wolfsbane Formula."

Peter's eyes widened. "You *are* well-informed! Yes, I have the formula right here!" Pettigrew patted his coat pocket warmly. "Along with a sample of the potion."

He laughed again. "Intelligent werewolves. The Holy Grail of Emeric Belasco. All mine." He looked around the room. "I just want to thank you all. If James comes through with Rookwood for me, this may be the happiest day of my life! Ha! I may even learn to summon a Patronus of my own after this!"

"Oh, and to answer your question, I left Snivellus to die of a tragic potions accident." He sneered at Harry. "As you put it, *what a tragedy*."



"Why are you even telling us all this?" Harry asked, eager to move things along.

"Killing time, Harry. Among other things." He pulled out his pocket watch again to check the time. "You see, my watch appears to be running fast. I'd have thought that Remus would start to change already, but apparently not, so I've got time to kill."

With that last remark, Harry looked over to the horrified Remus Lupin who was beginning to sweat profusely.

"Peter, *please!* Don't do this! After all these years, *don't make me a killer!*"

"Ah, Remus. I'm doing this precisely because of how much I value our friendship. I know how much you've struggled pointlessly all these years. And it's *so unnecessary!* Once you finally *give in and taste manflesh*, you'll see. You'll finally be what you were *meant to be!* Emeric the Evil's greatest work. A flawless instrument of death!"

"You can't use us as hostages if you feed us to a werewolf, *Uncle Pete*," Harry said sarcastically.

"I don't plan to!" Peter answered with a laugh. "Or at least not unless James is too stubborn. When Remus transforms, I can control him. Emeric's blood flows in my veins, and the Beast in him will submit to my will. So, I'm going to contact James on our little two-way mirror communicator and make my demands. And if he shows the slightest hesitation, I'll start by having Remus start biting you, one after the other! Just enough to *turn* you!"

"PETER! NO!" Remus screamed in horror.

"And I'm pretty sure we'll be starting with *you*, Harry Potter," Peter added maliciously. "Because believe it or not, I really do care a great deal about my godson ... and also because over the last three or so years, you have continually *pissed me off*!" He snorted contemptuously. "By the time I'm done with you, you'll have wished my little choo-choo train had gotten you like it was supposed to!"

"Th-that was you?!" Jim asked in shock.

"Yes," Peter said almost sadly. "I'm sorry it was necessary for you to get hurt that day. But I needed it to look as though you were the real target so that no one would suspect that the true objective was getting the prodigal Potter Heir out of the way."

"P-Peter!" Lily interrupted, her voice shaking. "Don't hurt the boys! Please! I'm begging you! If you must hurt one of us to get James to do as you want, make it *me*!"

Peter gave a belly laugh. "Is that what you told the Dark Lord, Lily? And how did that work out for everyone?" Then, his expression darkened. "But I'll tell you what, Lily. In gratitude over our *long friendship*, I'll make you this offer. If James does what I ask, neither boy will be harmed. If he won't play ball, then one of the Potter Twins gets a dose of lycanthropy to encourage him. I'll only let Remus turn you and your other son if he continues to defy me."

He knelt in front of the suddenly frightened witch. "*But* - and here's the deal - *you* get to pick which one it's going to be first! I mean, we both *know* James will probably be stubborn and stupid at least in the beginning. So, who do you want to save from the big bad wolf, Lily? The Boy-Who-Lived, the Savior of us all? Or the one you've already cast

off and sent to be abused and locked in a boot cupboard for ten years because you didn't want him?"

Lily was speechless, her face a mask of horror at the choice she'd been offered.

"The clock's ticking, Lily. Who's it going to be?"

Hesitantly, Lily drew breath to speak, but before she could utter a word, Harry spoke up defiantly.

"You won't do it!" the boy said with a sneer.

"Oh, won't I?" Peter said as he shifted closer to Harry while still in a crouch. "And what makes you think that?"

"Because you're a *rat*, Pettigrew," Harry said, his voice dripping with contempt. "I don't know how you tricked the Hat into putting a pathetic little coward like you into Gryffindor, but I know you won't let Remus hurt us, let alone kill us! You don't have it in you to be a cold-blooded...!"

**"AVADA ...!"**

**"DUCK!"** Harry screamed as he suddenly twisted and kicked at Pettigrew's leg, throwing off his aim. Across the room, Marcus Flint (who no longer looked the least bit glassy-eyed) flung himself down to the floor, the Killing Curse missing him by less than a foot, even as he pointed his own wand towards the Animagus.

**"EXPPELLIARMUS!"** There was a flash of light that knocked Pettigrew onto his back and his wand up in the air. In a flash, Harry stretched his arms, and instantly, Pettigrew's wand flew into his open hands.

**"FINITE INCANTATEM"** he cried out, and his bonds swiftly melted away. Across the room, Flint, still lying prone, fired off a Stunner towards Pettigrew. But the Animagus was too fast. He rolled out of the way and then, in the blink of an eye, assumed his rat form before scurrying towards a nearby hole in the wall.

Instantly, Harry pulled himself up to one knee and took aim at the fleeing rat. He dilated for a single heartbeat, during which the rat was moving almost comically slow to his enhanced perceptions. Then, he released the dilation and cast his spell.

**"HOMORPHUS REVERSO!"**

There was another flash of light which struck the rat when it was less than a foot from the hole, and just like that, Peter Pettigrew was once again a man ... who was flying headfirst towards a thick wall. With a crash, the betrayer slammed into the wall hard enough to put a noticeable dent in it. He fell back with a scream and then clutched his head which was now bleeding profusely. Harry rose and practically sauntered over to him, idly binding him with an Incarcerous as he did so.

"HOW?!" Pettigrew screamed even as blood poured down his face. "YOU'RE A BLOODY THIRD YEAR! HOW THE HELL COULD YOU POSSIBLY KNOW *THE ANIMAGUS REVERSAL CHARM*?!"

Harry smirked. "Proper planning prevents poor performance."

The Slytherin knelt by the restrained man and began rifling through his coat to retrieve everyone's wands. In the process, he found a familiar pair of handcuffs that Pettigrew had used on James before to prevent him from changing

forms. With a smirk, Harry quickly bound the rat Animagus with them.

"You're finished, Pettigrew. These cuffs ensure you won't be able to change form again. Also, for the record, your plan was ridiculous, overcomplicated, and doomed to fail ... which it now officially has."

And then, the boy leaned in and added in a vicious whisper. *"I was planning on killing you, Pettigrew. But I think I prefer the idea of you growing old in Sirius Black's old cell instead."*

Peter snarled angrily at the boy, but Harry just grinned at him smugly before rising and heading towards the others. Marcus was in the process of freeing Lily and Jim from their bonds. Jim was completely shellshocked, but Lily could only look at Harry with a guilt-ridden expression.

Harry hesitated. He had interrupted his mother before she could be forced to declare which of her sons would be cursed with lycanthropy for Peter's sick amusement. But he felt certain that she would have once again chosen Jim over him, though at least he was spared hearing it. And he certainly didn't want to discuss the matter here and now.

"Harry ...."

"Let's ... save the conversations until we're out of here, okay ... Mum?"

"Yes, let's!" added Marcus with a strangled expression. "What with the *werewolf* about to change and all!"

Harry looked over to Flint and was taken aback. The other Slytherin was looking at Remus with undisguised hatred. Which was to be expected given who "Flint" really was.

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### ***Earlier ...***

"Okay," Harry said slowly while discreetly letting his wand fall into his hand. "There's a way to calm the tree down and also to open up a secret passage at the bottom. But what is it?"

"There's a knot at the bottom you have to either press or hit with a Stunner," Flint supplied.

Harry tensed and readied himself. "How did you know ...?"

**"*STUPEFY*."**

In a blur of motion, Harry whirled around and batted the Stunner away before firing off one of his own at the older Slytherin. Marcus Flint slumped to the ground. Harry exhaled slowly and then looked around to see if anyone had seen the brief and one-sided duel. Then, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his communication mirror.

"Regulus! It's Harry! I need you to come to Hogwarts, *right now*!"

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### ***Now ...***

Unfortunately, while Reg's deception had fooled Pettigrew completely, Harry was now suddenly reminded of the younger Black's *intense* emotions where the topic of werewolves was concerned. He took a quick glance at his watch. They still had a moment or two before Remus's transformation, but it would be close.

"Get my mother and Jim out of here, *Marcus*! Now!"

With that, he ran back to Pettigrew for the Wolfsbane Potion vial, as well as the Belby formula and the note containing the Secret.

"Remus! I have your potion!" He stood and pulled the stopper ready to rush it over to Lupin, but with an angry roar, Pettigrew twisted his whole body to kick his legs against Harry hard enough to trip him and knock him down. To the boy's dismay, the Wolfsbane Potion spilled out all over the floor.

"Dammit!" he cursed.

"Haha! One good kick deserves another, *brat*! Emeric's blood flows through my veins. And the Beast inside every werewolf will *always* recognize its master ... *even by scent*!"

"NO, PETER!" Remus yelled through his sobs. "I WON'T DO IT! WHATEVER IT TAKES, I WON'T HURT ANYONE!"

"YOU WILL, REMUS! CHANGE! CHANGE NOW AND KILL THEM ALL!"

"***STUPEFY!***" Harry screamed at the Animagus, and Peter slumped to the floor. But it was too late.

Nearby, Remus Lupin *screamed* as his eyes turned to amber. And then, those screams turned to howls of mindless rage as his muscles started to bulge and his jaw cracked and distended into a muzzle full of long, sharp teeth. To Harry's horror, the transformation was somehow taking place even faster than in the prior timeline. Across the room, Lily was trying to force Jim out the door to the tunnel while training her wand on the werewolf, but the Boy-Who-Lived was transfixed by the sight of it. "Marcus" simply stood his ground with his wand pointed at Remus and fire in his eyes.

As the werewolf ripped free from both his bonds and his clothes, the Metamorphmagus's face twisted into a mask of boundless rage as Regulus Black was mentally transported back to a different shack on the other side of the world where he'd once faced down his wife and son's killers.

**"AV- ...!"**

**"EXPPELLIARMUS!"** Even though Harry was still on the floor, his Disarming Jinx blasted Reg's wand from his hand before he could complete the Killing Curse, knocking him back against the wall in the process. But the flash of light from Harry's wand drew the werewolf's attention. The Beast snarled, saliva pouring from its mouth, and it turned in his direction before charging towards its prey. Harry dilated instantly.

Unfortunately, this time, the werewolf was closer than before. And this time, Harry was lying on his side with his wand pointing in the wrong direction. Even dilating, Harry knew that he would not have time to get a spell off, not even a Parselmagic Sectumsempra if he were willing to kill Remus Lupin a second time. This time, as Harry stared into the glowing amber eyes of the bloodthirsty werewolf, he knew he only had one possible chance.

So, he took it.

**"LEGILIMENS!"**

## Chapter End Notes

Next: Into the mind of a werewolf! Plus, Lily makes her moves, and Harry has a much anticipated conversation with James, followed by two more conversations he wasn't expecting at all.



AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P\*\*\*\*\*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2 (What the Sinister Man is reading): Hermione Granger and the Missing Friend by Ian Hycrest. In which Harry disappears over the summer after 4th year, and Hermione has to step up.

The Boy Who Lived by Gatalicious. In which an 11-year-old Harry starts at Hogwarts and his horrified to learn what the Boy Who Lived really means – in a world where Voldemort killed every other magical child in his age group.

A Family's Assistance by Tangerine-Alert (author of Lawyers Against the Cup and the Extradition stories). In which Harry is so desperate to avoid the Triwizard Tournament that he goes to Draco for help.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors:

ACI100Anne-athema Codex, BlueWater5, HeidiWolf, JenniferWeasley, jobber, LFGB, Luc the Virtual Arm Twister, Mr. Yarrow Dread Ellen Ink, Marq., Pivosh, ProgKingHughesker, RameseZwei, sielk, sfu, sigurd, TNT, TzarDeRus, and ZombeyUnicorn42. Thanks guys!

AN4: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 13,192. Followers: 14,189. Favorites: 12,367. Communities: 214. Discord followers: 2400! Go Team POS

# Redux (Part 3)

## Chapter Notes

### SHAMELESS PLUG!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### ***Harry Potter and the Death Eater Menace***

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***Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.***

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## ***Chapter 45: Redux (Part 3)***

### ***Somewhere, somewhen ...***

*The little boy had been lost in the woods for longer than he could remember, and as the night got colder, he'd ended up huddled under a tree sobbing quietly and shivering both*

*from the cold and from fear. For he knew that there was a monster after him, a great and terrible monster that would devour him whole if it caught him. Then, the boy gasped in terror as a demonic howl erupted from farther into the woods. It was some distance away, but closer than the last time he'd heard it just a few minutes before. The boy began to weep piteously. He was alone and cold, and the monster would be here soon. Then, as that thought rippled through his terrified mind, the boy heard another sound much closer. He turned and saw that the bushes just a few feet away were rustling as some thing pushed its way through them. And the distant howl that had so frightened the boy was now replaced by a different animal sound. A low, hungry growl.*

*The bushes parted ...*

... and Harry Potter staggered into the clearing looking disheveled and very confused. Instantly, he whirled about with wand in hand, looking for whatever psychic defenses the werewolf might have to use against him. Considering Professor Snape's thoughts on the *sheer idiocy* of Legilimizing a transformed werewolf, Harry was quite surprised to see no immediate dangers at all.

He examined the scene more carefully, but it was simply an open clearing in the middle of some woods. High above, the night sky was clear, and a full moon shone down upon him. Despite the apparent peacefulness of the scene, Harry grew increasingly tense. Time functioned differently when inside someone else's head via Legilimency, but it didn't stop completely. And he had no idea how long he could afford to dally in these woods before his mental journey ended with the sensation of werewolf claws ripping him apart in the physical world.

Finally, in his frustration, he thrust his arms out and yelled up at the night sky. "Okay! I'm here! Now what?!"

To his surprise, the only response was a soft whimper from behind a nearby tree. Harry cautiously made his way over to it and discovered that he was not alone in this mindscape. For behind the tree, there was a small boy, aged four or so. The child was dirty, terrified, and shivering in the cold, and when Harry reached for him, the boy recoiled in fear.

"Shhh!" Harry said while putting on his most winning smile. "It's okay, kid. I'm not going to hurt you." Then, the Slytherin noticed that the boy seemed strangely familiar. "Hey, you're Remus, aren't you? Little Remus Lupin."

The child nodded nervously. "Wh-who are you?"

"My name's Harry. Harry Potter. Does ... does that name seem familiar to you?"

Remus quickly shook his head.

"It's okay. I'm a friend, Remus. I'm here to help if I can. What are you doing out in these woods?"

The child shrugged. "I dunno. I just ... I just woke up here. And then, I had t'hide from d'Monster!"

"The ... Monster?" Harry asked. He assumed "the Monster" was a werewolf. But was this a memory of Fenrir Greyback? Or was the child afraid of the werewolf that he himself became every month.

And then, Harry heard the *howl*. It was definitely a werewolf – Harry would never forget *that* sound now that

he'd heard it at close range. But this howl came from some distance away.

"Okay, Remus. The Monster's not here now. But it's probably coming. Is there some safe place near here?"

Remus shook his head miserably. Then, from the far side of the clearing, there was a rustle in the underbrush, and the child whimpered at the sound of it. Instantly, Harry whirled around, wand in hand. But he couldn't see anyone or anything.

"Remus, is there more than one Monster?" The boy slowly nodded his head, his eyes wide with terror. But as Harry kept his wand trained on the underbrush, no werewolves burst out to attack them.

"Stay here, Remus," Harry said as he slowly made his way across the clearing.

"*Don't!*" Remus whispered urgently. "*It'll get you!*"

But nothing sprang forth to get him. Indeed, as Harry drew closer, there was another rustle of the underbrush, and this time, he realized that whatever was moving through the scrub didn't even come up to his waist.

"Oookay," Harry muttered. "If it's a werewolf, it's a *very* small one."

He gestured with his wand, and the thin branches of the bushes parted. On the other side of them was ... a wolf. Not a werewolf, but rather a perfectly *normal* wolf. Specifically, a timber wolf with grayish-white fur and amber eyes. It looked up at Harry almost peacefully, and it didn't growl but merely panted softly.

Now completely confused, Harry looked back up at the sky and yelled out in annoyance. "A hint would be nice! You know - from the Time-Turner or from Fate or *whatever*! What am I supposed to do with all this?!"

None of those entities deigned to respond, but there was another howl from farther in the woods. It was the werewolf, now significantly closer. From behind him, Harry could hear little Remus crying. Then, the wolf barked at him once as if to get his attention.

Harry looked back at the animal and found himself staring into its deep amber eyes. Suddenly, the Slytherin's own eyes widened in recognition, for he had seen eyes that color before. Instantly, he looked back towards little Remus and then to the wolf, back and forth several times.

And then, he burst into laughter.

"Of course! Remus Lupin! Wolfy McWolferson! Hee!"

With an excited grin on his face, Harry took a step forward and knelt, extending his hand towards the wolf as he did.

"Hey there, boy! It's me! Harry Potter. You know, James and Lily's son!"

Cautiously, the wolf came out from the underbrush and gently licked Harry's hand. With a smile, Harry reached up and rubbed the wolf's head and scratched behind its ears. Then, he turned to the other boy.

"Remus, it's okay! Come here! He won't hurt you! I promise!"

After a few seconds of cajoling, the child finally came over to stand beside Harry, his eyes wide at the sight of the

beautiful creature.

"You see, Remus. This isn't a monster. This ... this is *you*. Or a part of you anyway. Right now, we're inside *your head*. And this wolf is ... well, I guess we can call it your spirit animal. The part of you that's a part of the natural world. He won't harm you."

Gingerly, the child put his own hand out towards the wolf, which stepped forward and licked his hand as well. Then, it took another step and began to lick the boy's face to his surprise and general delight. With a giggle, little Remus suddenly fell onto the wolf and gave it a hug.

Despite his general cynicism, Harry found the scene remarkably heart-warming.

Naturally, that was when the *real* Monster showed up.

With a mighty crash, the werewolf burst through the woods on the other side of the clearing before throwing back his head and giving a bloodthirsty howl. Immediately, Harry saw that this werewolf looked identical to the one that was probably inches away from him in the real world. If the child was Remus as a human (still traumatized by his childhood infection), and the wolf was Remus as an animal (fully attuned to his animal-self), this was Remus as a werewolf, consumed with raw anger and savage appetites.

Instantly, Harry snapped his wand towards the beast while he tried to figure out what to do. He knew how to kill a werewolf in the real world, but he had no idea what the effect of using Sectumsempra on *this* werewolf while inside Remus Lupin's psyche would have on the man's health and sanity. Happily, it turned out not to matter.

Before Harry could cast a spell, the timber wolf moved in front of him and growled intimidatingly at the Monster. And then, even more surprisingly, the little boy moved in front of him as well, his terror of the beast completely gone.

"You don't scare me! Not anymore! D'you hear me?! You don't scare either of us! We're together now, like we always shoulda been! And you'll never scare us again!"

And to Harry's amazement, the werewolf did not advance. Instead, it staggered back as if struck before throwing its head back and howling wildly at the night sky. The power of the howl struck Harry as if it were a physical thing, and it seemed to push him back, back ...

---

... back into his own body!

Harry shook his head to get his bearings. The werewolf Remus was still looming over him, but just as it had in the mindscape, it staggered back in distress before throwing its head back and howling madly. And then ... it dropped to the ground and landed on all fours. Its entire body shook and then rippled before it started to *shrink*! After just a few seconds, the werewolf was gone completely. And in its place was the beautiful gray-white timber wolf that Harry had seen in Remus's mind.

It panted for a few seconds as if to recover from the transformation, and then, it looked up at Harry. The wolf's amber eyes *gleamed* with human intelligence.

"What in the name of *Merlin's balls* is going on here?!" Marcus/Regulus bellowed as he summoned his wand back to his hand.

"It's okay! Calm down! Remus isn't a threat anymore!"



In response, Lily and Jim slowly stepped away from the door to see.

"What ... what happened?" Jim said dazedly.

Harry looked up at the others while idly scratching behind Remus's ears just as he'd done in the mindscape.

"Remus Lupin is - and always *was* - a natural Animagus whose animal form was a wolf! That's why his parents named him that on the advice of a Nomenographer. And I'll bet that's why Fenrir Greyback was drawn to attack him and turn him instead of killing him outright. I mean, if you think about it, there's no way a transformed werewolf could have failed to kill a four-year-old child unless there was something weird going on.

"If things had proceeded as they should have, Remus would have spontaneously developed the ability to transform into this form sometime after puberty. But Greyback bit him and infected him with lycanthropy when he was just a small child. He never lost control because his latent Animagery protected him, but at the same time, he was so traumatized by the experience of *being* a werewolf that he instinctively recoiled from embracing his animal side."

Jim stared at the scene in confused amazement. "So ... he's cured?!"

Harry shrugged. "That, I don't know. We'll probably have to wait until the next full moon to test it because I certainly don't want him trying to turn back *right now while we're all in here!*"

The wolf barked once to indicate its agreement.

"But even if he still technically carries lycanthropy, as long he assumes his Animagus form *before* the full moon hits, he'll stay in this shape instead of becoming a werewolf. That's ... *mostly* a cure, I reckon."

Harry stood and wiped the dust off his clothes. "So, now that *that* crisis is averted, we can get out of here. Let's take 'Uncle Pete' to the castle and summon the Aurors, maybe?"

"Good idea," Lily said. To one side of her, Regulus still stood quietly in the form of Marcus Flint, his eyes fixed on Remus as if waiting for the wolf to turn back into a monster. To the other side stood Jim, who could only stare at the unconscious form of Peter Pettigrew with an unreadable expression.

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### ***Moments later ...***

As the group exited the secret passage beneath the Whomping Willow, Harry was pleased to see Severus Snape rushing to meet them, along with Professors McGonagall and Flitwick, with Theo following further behind. After stunning the real Marcus Flint and then summoning Regulus to take his place, Harry and Reg smuggled the unconscious (and likely still Imperiused) young man into the castle so that Reg could swap clothes with him.

Then, Harry sent his Patronus to a very surprised Theo No-Name, who was even more surprised by Harry's instructions: that he wait until 6:30 p.m. before rescuing Severus Snape from Pettigrew's weak attempt at a death trap. Harry was quite pleased to see that he'd timed everything perfectly, though the thunderous expression on Snape's face suggested that he might pay a price later for leaving the Potions Master unconscious in his own lab for

several hours. Hopefully, Theo neglected to mention to him that the delay had been deliberate.

After Harry handed over the Secret note and explained everything that had happened – including the fact that the timber wolf at Harry's side was actually the Caretaker Malachi Sturgeon and *also* Remus Lupin the (maybe-not) werewolf – an astonished Professor McGonagall took charge of the situation and levitated Pettigrew back towards the castle, with a bemused Flitwick and a surly Snape following behind.

Suddenly, Lily spoke up.

"Professor Flitwick, would you please escort Jim to the castle and see that he goes to the Infirmary for a check-up? I'll be along shortly, but I need to speak to Harry for a moment."

"Mum?" Jim said uncertainly.

"It's okay, Jim. We'll only be a few minutes."

The Boy-Who-Lived hesitated before following the diminutive professor. Meanwhile, both Theo and "Marcus" gave intent looks to Harry, and he responded with a nod indicating he would be okay. Soon after, Harry and his mother were alone.

Lily took a deep breath. "First of all, let me say ... you were *amazing* in there, Harry. I'm very proud of how you handled yourself and how you took down Peter. You're a credit to the instructors you've had over the last few years."

Harry blinked in surprise at the praise. "... Thank you."

The witch looked pensive for a moment before soldiering on. "Second ... we need to talk about ... what happened back in the Shrieking Shack. About ... that sadistic Sophie's choice that Peter gave me."

"Sophie's ... choice?" Harry asked in confusion.

"Sorry. It's from a movie that came out a few years ago. About a woman who ... who's made to decide which of her two children would be killed in front of her."

Harry swallowed. "It's okay. You don't have to say ..."

"I would have chosen you," she said, interrupting.

Harry's mouth hung open at the blunt revelation. Then, he nodded slowly. "O-of course. I understand. Jim's the Boy-Who-Lived and you're his mother. In the end, everything is going to depend on him. And so, if it comes down to the two of us," he paused as his voice broke, "y-you're always going to protect him at my expense. I'm sure James would approve."

Lily looked at him strangely and then chuckled. "Oh, I doubt that, Harry. I doubt that very much. And yes, I do have an obligation to protect Jim as much as I can for the sake of the world. But sometimes, being Jim's mother – and James Potter's wife – means having to think three or four steps ahead, because your father usually won't. And sometimes ... it means taking actions he would never consider."

She took a step forward and put her hands gently on Harry's shoulders. "When I said I would have chosen you, I meant I would have chosen to *save* you over Jim."

Harry was shocked at her words. "Wh-what?! But why?"

She looked away, suddenly pensive. "Several reasons, most of which might sound cold. First of all, I don't think it was even a real choice. I think Peter really does care for Jim in his own twisted way, and he would have sent Remus after you regardless of what I said. But I thought it might throw him off if I chose you over Jim and so delay him until I could figure something else out. Then there's the fact that, as you said, Jim *is* the Boy-Who-Lived. That gives him some ... *power* that I don't understand but which was enough to let him destroy Voldemort twice and to kill a Basilisk last year. I hoped that it might kick in again to save him if Peter really did set a werewolf on him, or at least protect him from catching lycanthropy. And if worst came to worst, I thought the Boy-Who-Lived would be better able to handle the effects of becoming a werewolf than his Slytherin brother who the *Daily Prophet* has been slandering for years."

Harry found himself surprised and almost shocked by Lily's reasoning. It was almost ... *Slytherin*. He suspected Nidhogg would approve of his mother. And strangely, he wasn't sure how he felt about that.

"And finally," she continued after a moment's hesitation, "to be *completely* honest, I thought that if Peter threatened James with Jim's life, James would be more willing to do whatever it took to save us, even if it meant freeing Rookwood, than if he'd threatened to harm you."

The boy grimaced. "Yeah, you're probably right about that."

Lily bowed her head. Then, she looked into Harry's eyes with an intense expression.

"Harry, I want you to know ... I *love* your father. Sometimes, I really wonder why. But I do."

"Have you checked for potions?" Harry muttered reflexively. Then, he blushed as he realized he'd said that aloud. But his mother just laughed.

"Yes, actually. I make it a habit to regularly check myself for potions. And while I'm probably not as good an Occlumens as you are, I am good enough to detect that sort of emotional manipulation. No, I'm afraid it's real love. But ..."  
She hesitated.

"There are limits to what I'll tolerate for the sake of loving of James Potter. You know that he's ... not rational on the topic of you being a Slytherin, right? I don't think that's going to change. He'll do whatever he can to remove you as a Potter."

"He can try," Harry answered darkly.

"Well, if it comes to that ... would you consent to become *Harry Evans* and move in with me? Because if that's what it takes, I will divorce James and cut ties with him forever to take custody of you."

Harry looked at his mother in shock. "You would? But ... what about Jim?"

Lily looked pained but soldiered on anyway. "Jim ... would be safe with James. I'm certain of that. It's *you* that he has problems with. And he does so for reasons he thinks are valid, though I can't approve of how he's acted on those reasons. I would tell you if I could..."

She shook her head angrily. "Harry, I would do anything to protect you and Jim. I know I've made terrible mistakes trying to do so. I really did think you would be safe with Petunia and ... *that animal*. Just as I really did think you would be better off separated from a family that's a

lightning rod for Pureblood hatred. And I understand if you hold my mistakes against me forever. But if I can make it up to you, I will. And that includes taking you away from all this. Like I said – I know Jim will be okay with James and probably better off without me. You and I can leave all this behind. How does France sound?"

"... *France*?!" Harry nearly squawked.

Lily nodded. "You can transfer to Beauxbatons. We can even invite your friend Theo to live with us since the Sanction won't affect us there. And you needn't worry about money. Your grandmother Dorea made sure of that!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Harry said taking a step back. "This is all a bit fast. And I don't want to leave Hogwarts. I ..."

The boy paused midsentence and then *looked* at his mother. And suddenly, he understood. Lily Potter *knew* about the Potter Prophecy. James had told him so in the prior timeline. And she was proposing this as her own way of averting it, by offering him a new life as an Evans in another country where becoming Prince of Slytherin would not be a possibility. Of course, he himself had already given up on his claim to Princedom and was still weighing the decision of leaving House Potter anyway. And this proposal *might* be a good option for Theo.

But it would also mean allowing Lily Potter to publicly and unambiguously choose Harry over his brother, just as she supposedly had once before in Jim's Dementor-fueled fantasy from the previous November. Such a rejection would, Harry suspected, effectively end any chance of the two brothers reconciling. And it would also leave Jim in the sole custody of a man who'd been willing to curse him with an Unforgivable.

A year earlier, Harry would have rejoiced in winning such a victory over Jim. But now?

"I need to think about this ... *Mum*," he finally said.

She nodded with a smile. "Of course."

She put her arm around Harry's shoulders and walked with him up the hill to the castle.

---

***St. Mungo's Hospital***  
***7:30 p.m.***

As he stared through the glass window, James Potter suppressed a shudder. On the other side of the glass, five hit wizards lay strapped down in hospital beds, their faces frozen into masks of terrified glee as they each continued to giggle and laugh softly despite being heavily sedated. According to the best Healers that St. Mungo's had to offer, the curse afflicting them was irreversible. For as long as these wizards and witches lived, they would either be unconscious ... or they would *laugh*. Even eating and drinking would be impossible, and the St. Mungo's staff would need to regularly spell nutrient potions and water directly into their stomachs while they were asleep, or else they would die from malnutrition or dehydration.

The horror James felt at the fate of his fellow law officers was only worsened by the guilt he also carried. The hit wizards had been cursed by a dark artifact: a "toy" fashioned by Erasmus Wilkes before his death that had somehow come into the possession of Peter Pettigrew, James's best friend who it now seemed had been a Death Eater all along. And if Peter had a storehouse of Wilkes's toys, it probably meant that he was the one responsible for the attack on Jim Potter's birthday party in July of 1992. The



attack that had left three people dead and several injured, including James's predecessor as Chief Auror.

And James had been *blind* to it all. And even worse, he'd stayed silent when Thicknesse reported that the Death Eater who accompanied Greyback's pack had been a rat Animagus.

The wizard was suddenly distracted from his ruminations by the appearance of a glowing silver turtle that materialized in the air beside him and spoke to him with the voice of Pius Thicknesse.

"Chief, I wanted to let you know. Peter Pettigrew has been captured. I'm afraid he was at Hogwarts. According to Professor McGonagall, he had taken your wife and both your sons as hostages, but your son Harry and a young man named Marcus Flint somehow got the better of him. We're having Pettigrew brought to the Ministry, but I thought you might want to go to Hogwarts and see to your family first. We can handle Pettigrew's interrogation."

The turtle Patronus faded from view. James stared vacantly at the space where it had floated. Then, a sudden mad cackle from one of the hit wizards startled him out of his reverie. He rubbed his hand across his two-day beard stubble before pulling out his own wand.

"***EXPECTO PATRONUM.***" With a flash of light, a stag Patronus answered his call. "Go to Pius Thicknesse. Tell him ... tell him that I will be there momentarily to observe the interrogation. I can check in on my family once Peter... I mean ... once Pettigrew is processed and has delivered an initial statement."

The stag nodded once and then disappeared in a flash of light. James took one last look at the cursed hit wizards

before turning and heading away towards the hospital's Apparation point.

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***Hogwarts***  
***The DADA classrom***  
***7:30 p.m.***

It had taken Regulus some time before he could get away from all the people who wanted to question "Marcus Flint" about everything that had happened in the Shrieking Shack. Once he did so, the Metamorphmagus quickly made his way to the DADA classroom. Inside, there was a loud banging sound coming from within a locked cupboard. With a flick of his wand, the doors opened, and the real Marcus Flint fell out onto the floor – gagged, bound hand-and-foot, and naked save for a pair of bright yellow boxer shorts bearing the logo of the Wimbourne Wasps. He looked up at the figure wearing not only his clothes but his *face* and growled. With another flick of Reg's wand, the ropes and gag melted away.

"I do apologize for this indignity, Mr. Flint," Regulus said. "But I assure you it was quite necessary."

"*Necessary?!?*" Flint spat as he jumped up from the floor in a fury. "And just why the hell was it *necessary* to knock me out, strip me, and stuff me in a cupboard like a pair of old boots?!"

"Peter Pettigrew had you under the Imperius Curse, and at his command, you were trying to capture Harry Potter so that Pettigrew could brutally murder him."

Marcus stared at his double in shock. "... okay, that's a reason, I reckon. You can explain the rest of the story after you give me back *my bloody trousers!*"

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***Azkaban Prison***  
***The Warden's Office***  
***8:00 p.m.***

Warden Stark took a moment to rub his temples in the hopes that it might do something for his splitting headache. It had been six hours since his four new inmates had been processed and then tossed into their cells in the Maximum Security. And it had been just over an hour since the four werewolves had transformed. Even here, many floors above the Maximum Security level, the despondent and miserable howls of those four werewolves that were now under the effects of the Dementors could be heard.

*"As if this rock needed anything more added to its charming ambiance,"* he thought bitterly.

There was a soft knock on the door, and at Warden Stark's gruff command, one of his top lieutenants entered bearing a nervous expression. Stark glanced up before returning to the reports on his desk.

"Good evening, Jenkins. From your arrival, I take it all our Dementors are back in the Pit where they belong?"

There was an awkward pause. "I *think* so, sir," he finally said. *That* made Stark look up from his paperwork.

"You ... *think* so?"

The guard nodded anxiously. "I spoke with the Dementor who presented itself as the spokes ... creature. Well, not *spoke*, but you know what I mean ...."

*"Get on with it, man!"* Stark snapped.

"Yessir. Anyway, it said that all the Dementors have returned. Well ... actually, what it *said* was '*All Remnants have rejoined the Body*.' That plus some implied stuff about how it wanted to eat my children. But ...."

"But *what*, Jenkins?"

Jenkins swallowed nervously. "But they came in single file, sir. And I could *swear* I only counted ninety-nine."

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***The private quarters of Severus Snape***  
***8:30 p.m.***

Severus Snape dropped down into his favorite chair and sighed loudly. It had turned out to be a surprisingly exhausting day, and he was ready for the weekend and the Easter Break that would follow. And after being rescued from the humiliation of getting ambushed, confined, interrogated, and nearly murdered by *Peter Pettigrew*, he certainly *needed* a break. Luckily, Pettigrew's murder attempt was ineffectual thanks to Snape's Occlumency defenses, but he'd still needed the assistance of Theo No-Name to leave his private laboratory, and he'd been too late to be of any assistance to Sensible Potter.

Snape frowned. There was something off in the timeline, he felt. He gathered that Harry had subdued the Imperiused Marcus Flint and arranged for his replacement sometime around 5:30, and yet, Theo had not been sent to retrieve him until an hour later. That much he'd gathered from his brief conversation with Regulus Black before sending the Metamorphmagus away through his office Floo. Of course, there might be an innocent explanation for the seeming irregularity, but Snape could not conceive of any other than Sensible Potter, for some reason, not wanting his assistance

nor even involvement in an encounter with a Death Eater and a werewolf.

The Potions Master reached for the snifter of brandy on the table next to his chair and took a sip. He prepared himself to slip into a trance so that he could mentally review his interactions with Harry from earlier in the day to search for anything out of the ordinary. Possibly it was nothing, but Regulus had been decidedly evasive about some matters, enough to pique Snape's interest.

But before he could enter the trance, he was distracted by a soft knock on the door. He set the brandy down and went to open it. Waiting on the other side was Lily Potter, and she wore a more anxious expression than he'd ever seen on her face throughout their entire relationship. Despite himself, he tensed.

"Lily. Is there something wrong? With Harry or ... the other one?"

Lily rolled her eyes. "His name is still Jim after all these years. And no, they're both fine. I just ...." She paused and, to Severus's surprise, blushed slightly. "May I come in?"

He nodded his head slightly and stepped aside so his former friend could enter before closing the door behind her. She turned back and spoke.

"I just wanted to see if you were okay after whatever Peter did to you earlier."

Snape crooked an eyebrow. "I am perfectly fine, Lily. Pettigrew did nothing to me except to stun me into unconsciousness. The only harm I suffered came from embarrassment over him getting the best of me."

"Yes ... I suppose he got the best of a lot of people." She paused again even more awkwardly. "It's just ... he said that he'd killed you. I kind of blocked all that out at the time because the boys were in danger but ...."

She took a deep shaky breath. "When we got out of the tunnel and you were there, it suddenly hit me that I'd thought you might have died without me ever...."

"Ever *what*, Lily?"

"Without ever apologizing to you. For being too stubborn to forgive you for what happened back at school. For never thanking you properly for all the sacrifices you made on behalf of my family."

"But you did," he replied. "November 15th, 1991. Just a few hours after Quirrell made his abortive attempt to harm your younger son during a Quidditch match." He tilted his head slightly. "Master Occlumens, remember?"

"Well, I'm not a master, but I have the memory of an Occlumens. And while I recall that conversation, my apology back then wasn't ...."

"Sincere?"

"I was going to say *from the heart*," she answered. "I know I said I was sorry. And that I wanted my friend back. And I meant it. But I was also motivated by a desire to renew our friendship in the hopes that you would look after Harry in ways I couldn't. And you *have* and I'm grateful for it. But that's different than apologizing because I thought you might be dead, and I'd never have the chance to say ...."

Her sudden pause hung in the air for what seemed like hours rather than seconds.

"Sev ... can we talk?"

He blinked in confusion. "We are talking, Lily," he said, though he mentally added "*albeit in one of the most stilted and uncomfortable conversations I've ever had.*"

Lily shook her head. "No. I mean can we *really* talk. Like we did when we were kids. Before Sixth Year when everything went wrong."

He stared into a pair of green eyes and wondered just how close he was to a catastrophic mistake.

"Can I get you a brandy?"

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## ***Hogwarts***

***9:00 p.m.***

James Potter stalked down the halls of Hogwarts as anxious as he was exhausted. He'd only had four hours of sleep in the past day and a half, after all, and there was only so much Pepper-Up Potions could do. He'd witnessed the beginning of Peter's interrogation, but it had gone poorly. To James's surprise, it turned out Peter was a *much* better Occlumens than anyone had realized. Not good enough to *lie* exactly, but while under the effects of Veritaserum, Peter consistently answered "*I don't know anything about that*" to every question asked about his criminal activities or his history as a Death Eater. As the Chief Auror watched, he grew increasingly agitated over the proceedings to the point of trying to take over the questioning himself. It didn't help matters that he could almost feel every Auror in the room *judging* him for his missteps and foolishness.

Finally, Senior Auror Shackebolt put his foot down and insisted that James leave the interrogation to Aurors who

were not so personally involved in the case. And when James threatened to overrule him, Shackbolt dropped the bomb. He leaned in close so that only James could hear him whisper.

*"Is it really a good look for the Chief Auror and the father of the Boy-Who-Lived to be more focused on the Death Eater who embarrassed him than on the status of his own wife and children?"*

James started an angry response but then noticed how many people in the room were guardedly looking at him out of the corner of their eyes. He tersely thanked the other man for his advice and left for Hogwarts.

Upon entering the foyer, he was surprised to find Jim's friend, Hermione Granger, waiting for him.

"Good evening, Chief Auror Potter," she said calmly, although James had the oddest feeling from her expression, as though it held a barely concealed disdain.

"Miss Granger, isn't it? You're a Gryffindor, aren't you? Do you happen to know where Jim is right now?"

"He's in the dorm. I'll be happy to fetch him for you. But *first*, you should probably check in on your *other* son. You'll find Harry waiting for you in the reading room across the hall from the entrance to the dungeons."

There was a ghost of a smile on her lips that, for some reason, made James uncomfortable.

"He asked me to inform you that he had something very important to discuss with you," she continued. "*Important Potter family business*' was the way he described it."



Nonplussed, James nodded. "Thank you, Miss Granger. Would you ask Jim to meet me there, please?"

She gave a tight smile. "Of course." Then, she turned and headed towards Gryffindor Tower. James watched her leave with an uncertain expression before heading to meet with Harry.

He found his Heir moments later in the meeting room. Idly, James noticed that there were no portraits in here. In the middle of the room were two chairs on either side of a small table, upon which sat a worn old book. Harry sat in the chair farthest from the door, and he gave his father a welcoming smile when the man came in.

"Hello, Dad. It's great to see you."

"And you, Harry." James seemed to relax a bit at the sight of his son who seemed unharmed by the night's events. "How are you, son? Were you hurt? Did ... did Peter ... do anything to you?"

"Nothing I did not allow. Please, have a seat. We have a lot to talk about."

With that, the boy rose and sent a Locking Spell at the door, followed by three very high-level privacy spells. James's eyes widened in surprise as he cautiously moved to take a seat.

"First of all," Harry began. "This is for you. Or for the DMLE, I guess."

The boy handed over an expensive leather satchel marked with a brass plate bearing the initials "P.P."

"Pettigrew brought this to the Shrieking Shack. I found Jim's Invisibility Cloak in it. I gave that to Mum to return to him. I didn't think I'd be able to resist teasing him that this was the second time in two years he'd allowed it to be stolen by an agent of You-Know-Who, and I doubt he'd take it well. I didn't really look through the bag very thoroughly, but it also contained some papers, a few small bags of currency, some fake passports, and a lovely picture of the Marauders during your school days."

James winced as he took the bag. "Thank you, Harry. I'll get this turned over to the investigators first thing." He hesitated. "Listen, Harry. About Peter ... I hope you realize I had no idea ...."

"Oh, of course not, Dad. He fooled you like he did everyone else. I'm sure no one will hold Wormtail's actions against you."

James winced at that. He felt quite the opposite himself, as he was not entirely sure of whether his career could weather the current storm. Then, he suddenly wondered whether Harry felt the same and was just being reassuring. Or possibly sarcastic. He decided to press on.

"We'll see what happens, I guess. So what do you want to talk about?"

"I want to talk about us. About you and me. About House Potter. And about ... the *Prince of Slytherin*."

James stared at his Heir in shock for nearly five full seconds. "So ... you *do* know about that!" he finally said in a shaky whisper.

"I know a few things about it. I know it's the real reason you sent me to the Dursleys. And the reason you sent me a

drunken Howler on my first day of classes. I know it's why you turned against Jim when you found out he was a Parselmouth. *And I know that's why you put him under the Imperius and made him fear and distrust me!"*

Instantly, the blood drained from James's face. But before he could respond, Harry leaned forward and twisted the knife further.

"But most importantly, *Dad*, I know that *this is how our world will end – in a cold yet all-consuming fire!*"

Now in a panic, James shot out of his chair, and out of mad instinct, his wand was suddenly in his hand. "HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT?!"

Harry leaned back, utterly unconcerned with the wand pointing at him. "That's not important. What matters is that I *do* know – *every single word*. And more importantly, that I have taken steps to ensure the Prophecy and your own use of an Unforgiveable against Jim will both get revealed if anything happens to me. So I *suggest* you put that wand back in its holster before you cast some spell that we both regret."

Slowly, James sat back down, retracting his wand as he did. Harry spoke again almost languidly.

"What I *don't* fully know but would like to hear is: How did you come to assume that *I* am the twin more likely to become this so-called Prince of Slytherin? What do *you* think it means?"

"I ... I don't know *what* it means exactly. Jim told me that Ron remembered something about it from when he was possessed by Voldemort and talking with you in the

Chamber of Secrets. That's when I panicked and ... well, you know."

Harry looked at him dubiously. "That's it? That's all you know about this Prince of Slytherin thing that our family has fretted over for two centuries? *That's why you set Jim against me in reckless hate?* What makes you so certain that it means me?"

"You're the first Slytherin Potter since the Prophecy was uttered. It has to be you. I'm so sorry, but ... I have to stop you, whatever it takes."

The boy smiled almost mischievously. "Well, yes, of course you do! I mean, if it's not me, then it would have to be Jim who's going to rise as the Prince of Slytherin. You know, the son who actually speaks Parseltongue and who vanquished the so-called *Heir* of Slytherin. The *Last Potter* to be born to our family. The one who actually *was* set against his brother in reckless hate *by your hand*. And what a personal disaster it would be for you if *that* happened!"

That last remark left James confused. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm referring to the fact that so much of our family's political and social status comes from the fact that Jim Potter is the Boy-Who-Lived, a fact that, among other things, has led to you becoming the youngest Chief Auror since the British Auror Corps was founded. I'm referring to the fact that if Jim, who is *already* the subject of one True Prophecy, turns out to be the subject of this other one as well, then *you might lose your gravy train!*"

James' confusion and fear suddenly gave way to anger. "HOW DARE YOU!"

"I'll dare anything I please, *Dad!* Your interpretation of that prophecy caused me to spend ten years sleeping in a boot cupboard and getting beaten for burning the toast, while Jim lived a life of luxury, and *you* lived in his reflected glory." Harry's eyes gleamed. "What you did to me was awful, James Potter. But did you know it was also *a crime?*"

Harry reached over and flipped the book on the table so that the cover was visible.

### ***Divination and the Law***

"After I found out about the other Prophecy and figured out why you were acting the way you were, I asked a friend taking Divination to do some research. Apparently, it's a *felony* to intentionally try to manipulate the resolution of a True Prophecy for personal gain. '*Prophetic Malfeasance*,' it's called. There hasn't been a prosecution in centuries, but it's still the law."

James could only stare at his Heir in shock and confusion. "Harry, I *never* tried to ... *manipulate* the Prophecy!"

The boy shrugged. "That's for others to decide. Between the Prophecy, the way you've treated me my whole life, and, of course, your decades long friendship with the Death Eater Pettigrew, I have enough evidence that you tried to shape events so the Prophecy pointed at me rather than Jim to at least get it before the Wizengamot. The sentence for Prophetic Malfeasance, if you're wondering, is two to five years in Azkaban. Although the bigger problem for you is that at your trial, you can be put under Veritaserum and be forced to admit that you used *an Unforgivable on Jim!* Which is, of course, a *life sentence!*"

James tried to respond, but the words got stuck in this throat. For a good ten seconds, he just blinked rapidly while

moving his jaw up and down. Slowly, he lowered his head into his trembling hands, and after a moment, he began to sob. Harry frowned in annoyance, not at James's reaction but at his own. He'd been thinking about revenge against his father since the day he turned eleven. As the man began to softly weep in front of him, it was not as satisfying as he'd anticipated. After a moment, James slowly lifted his head and looked at his Heir with eyes wet with tears.

"Okay," he said softly in resignation.

Harry gaped in confusion. "... Okay? What do you mean ... *okay*?!"

James sniffled as he spoke. "Harry, I swear to you that I never intentionally tried to manipulate the Prophecy to hurt you or for any other purpose except to avert it. And I am sorrier than I can ever admit for what happened to you at the Dursleys and for the way I treated you since you came back to the Wizarding World. But ... you are right about my use of the Imperius. That truly was ... unforgiveable of me. It was done out of instinct in a moment of pure panic and terror, but that's no excuse."

He looked down at his hands which were shaking as if he had a palsy.

"Everything I've done has been out of a desire to prevent the Prophecy from coming to pass. And everything I've done has only made things *worse*. As Lord of House Potter, I am a failure. So ... I'm giving it up. I'll confess to using the Imperius on Jim and accept whatever punishment the Wizengamot gives me. You and Jim deserve justice. And I deserve Azkaban."

The Slytherin stared at him with wide eyes. "... *WHAT?!*" he shouted almost angrily.

"All I ask," James continued after pausing to wipe away some tears, "is that as the next Lord Potter, you promise to do whatever you can to avert the Prophecy. Get Jim the help he needs to overcome the Imperius so you can finally be the brothers you always should have been. Do whatever you can to make sure that *neither* of you becomes the Prince of Slytherin, whatever that means." His voice hitched suddenly. "B-be ... be the Lord Potter that I could never be!"

Harry glared at the broken man in a mixture of amazement and consternation.

"Honestly," he finally said, "after nearly three years, I finally reach this moment, and you just had to take all the fun out of it!"

"Wh-what?" James asked shakily as Harry jumped out of his chair and began pacing the room angrily. After a few seconds, he even dilated his perceptions and focused his Occlumency skills on his own emotions to determine exactly *what* he was feeling and *why* he was feeling it. And once he finally understood his own emotions, he whirled around to look at his father in astonishment. Not astonishment over anything new he'd learned about James Potter. Rather, it was an astonishment over what he'd just realized about himself, about what sort of person Harry Potter really was deep down inside.

*"You have no power over me anymore, James Potter. You can't do anything else to hurt me even if you wanted to. I'm free of you. And if I wanted, I could destroy you completely. But why should I? What would even be the point other than revenge? What would I really gain? You're no villain, not really. You're just a foolish man in over your head with burdens too heavy for you to carry. And punishing you for that certainly wouldn't undo all those years in the boot*

*cupboard. It would only turn me into something I don't want to be. Just another Tom Riddle, lashing out at the world in the hopes that revenge for his mistreatment would make his pain go away. You're not worth my hate, James Potter. Certainly not anymore, if you ever really were."*

Harry closed his eyes and took a long deep breath before exhaling slowly.

"*I release you, James Potter,*" he whispered too softly for the man to hear. And just like that, he felt a great weight lift from his shoulders.

"What?" James asked again in confusion. "What did you say?"

Harry sat back down in his chair. "Never mind what I said. Let's talk about our options. Now we *could* do what you propose. You go to Azkaban for life. I become the new Lord Potter at the age of fourteen. I *try* to repair my relationship with Jim even though he'll probably hate me even more if I send our father to prison. And House Potter tries to weather the scandal of your crimes while Voldemort is lurking around in the background somewhere.

Then, the boy smirked. "*Or ... we cut a deal.*"

James's brow furrowed. "... what sort of ... deal?" he asked suspiciously.

Harry looked around the room. "About a year and a half ago, I met with your good friend and solicitor, Peter Pettigrew, in this very room for what he called a *confidential settlement negotiation*. Did he ever mention that to you?"

James shook his head dumbly.



"At the time, he was pressuring me to surrender my Potter inheritance and leave the family. He even offered me two million Galleons for it."

Harry leaned forward in his chair. "Here's my counter-offer: *Eleven million!*"

"WHAT?!" the man exclaimed.

Harry frowned in annoyance. "That's the third time in under a minute you've just said *what*, James. Try to keep up. Eleven million galleons plus a few ... concessions, and I will surrender my claim to the Potter Seat. I'll even change my name if you think it's necessary to avert the Prophecy."

James stared at his son in amazement. Harry snorted.

"Honestly, James, I know you don't think much of us Slytherins, but I assure you, I have no desire to play any role in the destruction of the world. If nothing else, that's where I keep all my stuff. But I'm *not* leaving House Potter empty-handed. You put me through *Hell* for my entire childhood. If you want me to walk away now, it's going to cost you. *A lot.*"

"Okay, but ... eleven *million*?!" James exclaimed.

Harry laughed. The last time they were together in this room, James had piously claimed that he'd be willing to die to prevent the prophecy from coming to pass. This time, he was haggling over *money*.

"Well, okay," Harry said amiably. "Eleven million is slightly less than forty-five percent of your liquid assets, which doesn't even include real estate or entailed property. But if that's too much, we can always go back to that Azkaban idea you were floating a few minutes ago."

"No, no!" James said hastily. "Eleven million is ... fine. It may take me a little while to free it up, but I can manage it. So, what about your ... concessions?"

"Well, the biggest one is *emancipation*," Harry said.

"Emancipation? But ... you're only thirteen!"

"I'll be fourteen in August. If I take my OWLs this summer and pass them, I can get emancipated then on my own even without your permission. But as Lord of an Ancient and Noble House, you've had the authority to declare me a legal adult since my 11th birthday. That's how Pureblood families can get away with abandoning their squibs at that point when they don't get a Hogwarts letter. There's no problem with you granting me emancipation now."

"Okay, but ... Harry, do you really think you're mature enough to look after yourself completely?"

Harry's scoffed. "I've pretty much been doing it since I was *four*. This is not negotiable, James. Under no circumstances will you or anyone else have power to control my affairs ever again. Are we clear on this?"

James nodded slowly. "What else?"

"Just two minor favors. First, I'm very fond of Marcus Flint and Nymphadora Tonks. And so, I would be very grateful if you would write Marcus a letter of recommendation to the Auror Academy and also that you get Tonks reinstated."

"Of course," James said easily, as if it were the sort of favor that he'd have done for his son just for the asking. "And the other favor?"

"You do anything and everything you can to clear the way to Sirius Black's exoneration."

Instantly, James's face darkened in anger, but then, he looked away and fought to collect himself. "I'm still not sure of his innocence, Harry. I know I've had memories altered. But I still can't help but feel anger towards him for what he did ... I mean ... what I thought he did. And I still have my doubts."

"Then, get over them," Harry said harshly. "I'm offering you what you've wanted for almost as long as I've been alive - the chance *to save the world*. In comparison to that, does it even *matter* if he's guilty or not if by freeing him you can get rid of the dreaded Slytherin Potter?"

The man's eyes flashed angrily. But then, he slumped in his chair. Harry was right - he had no choice in the matter. "Is that all?"

Harry nodded.

"Good," James said. "Because I have a few conditions of my own."

"Of course, you do. What are they?"

"Well, the Potter Prophecy is our family's biggest secret, and I can't let it get out." James suddenly looked frightened. "You haven't told anyone *else*, have you?"

Harry looked at him as if the idea were absurd. "Of course not!" he lied brazenly.

The man sighed in relief. "Thank Merlin! In that case, I have a special oath I'll need you to swear."

Harry smiled easily. "Naturally." Then, he casually checked his watch and was amused to see that he would be taking the oath again at almost exactly the same instant he swore it in the prior timeline. He pulled out his wand and swore the now-familiar oath once more.

"Anything else?" he asked while putting his wand away.

"Yes. Your ... voluntary disownment won't be official until we announce it before the Wizengamot. Minister Fudge is calling another Emergency Session on Saturday to officially announce the end of the Azkaban crisis. As part of the House Business part of the agenda, I can formally emancipate you and then you can disclaim your Potter name." He hesitated. "But ... just to set my mind at ease, will you swear an Unbreakable Oath to affirm our agreement?"

Harry wrinkled his nose at the implication that he might change his mind about something so important in less than two days, but he decided not to complain. "So long as our oaths are reciprocal, then yes."

James exhaled in relief. "I'll meet with you in the morning along with someone to act as a bonder." Then, he suddenly took on an anxious expression. "Will you be okay as Harry No-Name? I know that's caused a lot of problems for your friend Theo."

"Are you planning on using the Ultimate Sanction on me?" Harry asked innocently.

"*Of course not!*" he sputtered in genuine and shocked offense. "Merlin! I would never do something like that to you!"

Harry smirked as he rose from his chair. "Then, I guess I have nothing to worry about. I'll see you in the morning for that oath." Then, he headed for the door only to turn back when James called out to him.

"Harry! Thank you for doing this. And for saving Jim and Lily earlier this evening. I owe you more than I can say."

"No, you just owe me eleven million galleons. Not a bad price for saving the world, I reckon." Then, Harry looked at James thoughtfully and then gave a surprisingly warm smile.

"I almost forgot. Happy Birthday!"

With that, he turned and opened the door only to find Jim Potter on the other side. "Congratulations, Potter," Harry said brightly. "This time, we *both* win!"

The Slytherin strode past the Gryffindor while whistling a cheerful tune. Jim watched him go and then turned to his father.

"What did you do?" he asked suspiciously but not angrily.

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After leaving the meeting room, a much happier (and wealthier) Harry Potter crossed the hall and entered the stairwell that led to the Slytherin dungeons. Halfway down, though, he was surprised to find that one of the paintings hanging on the wall had changed noticeably. Where it normally depicted a young woman in medieval dress sitting on a stool and playing a harp, it now depicted that same young woman *standing* on the stool and gesticulating in terror at the *flaming snake* that had crawled into her portrait. It was Esme, the ashwinder who normally resided in a painting that hung in the seldom-used COMC classroom

on the first floor. And she had been waiting for Harry, it seemed.

Harry looked around to make sure they were not observed, and he cast a quick Revelio to be sure.

"*Hello, Esssme,*" he hissed. "*It'sss been a while.*"

"*Yesss, it hasss,*" the ashwinder replied. "*But I have not come for a sssocial visssit. I bring tidingsss from the Hydra Throne. You are sssummoned.*"

Harry nodded in surprise and then continued down into the dungeons, as he wondered what the Hydra wanted. The Throne's last words to him had been rather final, after all.

---

Moments later, he had made his way through one of the many secret passages to the Lair's entrance and he let himself inside. Then, he bowed respectfully to the serpents.

"You asked to see me?" Harry said in human speech.

"Yes, Harry Potter," said Rajah the Basilisk in a deep echoing voice. "Since you left us, we have spent much time in deliberation, and we have reached a verdict. By a unanimous vote, your request to withdraw your claim to become the Prince of Slytherin is *denied*."

Harry did a double take. "... denied? I don't understand. How can you deny my choice not to become the Prince?"

"The purpose for which the Hydra Throne was created is to judge potential claimants for their worthiness to sit as Prince," the Basilisk continued. "We may find a claimant suitable or unsuitable, but we may not ignore the question of any claimant's worth once our evaluation has begun."

Likewise, even if a claimant ultimately refuses to take up the mantle of Prince, that does not relieve us of our obligation to confer it if it is truly deserved."

"... What?" Harry asked uneasily.

"Long have I watched you, Harry Potter," said Jormungand, the Exemplar of Diplomacy. "From your earliest days at Hogwarts, you have cultivated not just allies but true friends and from among the unlikeliest candidates. Your skill at politics and diplomacy is unquestioned. I judge you worthy."

"Well, thanks, but I don't see ...." But the Ashwinder interrupted before he could finish.

"Though I chastised you last year for a lapse into thoughtlessness, you have shown great improvement," said Mara, the Exemplar of Cunning. "Even while falling to your death, you kept your mind as keen as a razor's edge and so defeated your enemies. I judge you worthy."

"What is happening here?" he asked a bit more urgently.

"Your intelligence sets you apart from all of our House, Harry Potter," said Ka, the Exemplar of Intellect. "Your standing among your academic peers speaks for itself. I judge you worthy."

"Now everybody just hold on a second!"

"Well, it goes without saying, darling, that I have always found you a delight!" cooed Delilah, the Exemplar of Charm. "Naturally, I judge you worthy."

"Well, I like you too, Delilah, but just listen...." Harry began before the three-headed Runespoor spoke over him.

"You are fluent in the ways and means of the Wizengamot, as befits a future Lord," said Tisiphone, Megaera and Alecko, the Co-Exemplars of Tradition in three-part harmony. "Your occasional lack of decorum concerns us. Yet we know that you have taken up the *highest* tradition of Wizarding Britain, opposition to those who would use and misuse That Which Is Forbidden. Despite your tendency towards frivolity, you have clearly taken your place on the Watch Tower. We judge you worthy."

"The ... *Watch Tower*?" the boy asked in confusion.

"I have had my doubts," growled Nidhogg, the Exemplar of Ruthlessness. "Your refusal to slay the traitor once he fell under your hand gives me pause, as does your decision to spare your father from complete ruination. *But* the true test of Ruthlessness is not what you are willing to do to your enemies, but what you are willing to do to your *friends*. I have watched as you intentionally allowed Remus Lupin to be captured by the traitor, as you risked the life of Severus Snape to advance your scheme, and as you sought to turn your own father against your brother as a method of weakening his resolve and breaking his will. I *approve* and find you worthy."

"PLEASE STOP!" Harry yelled, even as his mind reeled at the knowledge that he'd gained Nidhogg's approval through several recent and dubious actions over which he felt profoundly guilty. "Everybody! Just stop and listen to me!"

But Rajah, the Exemplar of Ambition, continued relentlessly. "Like Nidhogg, I have had my doubts about you. You are young and have not yet fully articulated any greater vision for yourself or for the world. You have set yourself against the Dark Lord Tom Marvolo Riddle, but it is not enough to



be *against* something. True ambition means to be *for* something greater than yourself.

"But then, today, you came to us, warned us of the Prophecy you had heard, and disclaimed the role of Prince, a position for which you have worked diligently since the moment you became aware of it. You sacrificed your ambitions for the Greater Good. Not the facile Greater Good of weak pretenders who mouth those words only as a way to rationalize their own misdeeds. The true Greater Good only comes from the sacrifice of self for the benefit of all. The highest purpose of the Prince of Slytherin is to subordinate one's own goals and desires to the betterment of both this House and this World. And by seeking to withdraw your claim to this office for selfless reasons, you only proved your fitness for it. I find you worthy."

Harry stared at the Throne, dumbfounded. "I ... I withdrew my name because there's a Prophecy saying that *THE WHOLE WORLD MIGHT BE DESTROYED IF I BECOME PRINCE!*"

"We are aware of this," Rajah said casually, as if the matter were a minor inconvenience. "We recommend you make averting this Prophecy and saving the world from destruction an important priority for your administration. The Throne is yours ... Prince Harry Potter."

To Harry's right, there was a flash of light as the wards that protected most of the rare books and grimoires lining the shelves from contact suddenly dissolved. Then, there was a loud *whoosh* as a fire spontaneously started in the fireplace. A second later, Tweak, the Slytherin house elf, appeared with a soft pop carrying a bucket of Floo powder which he carefully placed next to the fire. The elf then snapped his fingers, and a bowl of Harry's favorite snacks appeared on

the conference table along with a cold butterbeer with a straw already sticking out of the top. Tweak bowed respectfully before popping away.

Harry stood slack-jawed for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, he roused himself from his stupor and made his way around the table towards the Throne. Halfway, he stopped in front of the wall of silver placards identifying his predecessors. A new placard had been added at the end, one bearing the name "*Harry Potter*." On the bright side, at least the Throne hadn't immortalized him as "Hadrian." He continued on around the table before finally plopping down onto the Throne. He looked around the room from this new vantage point before finally speaking his first words as the Prince of Slytherin.

"*SONOVABITCH!*"

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### ***An empty alleyway near Whitehall in Central London 11:00 p.m.***

The offices of the Ministry of Magic were located within a ten-story subterranean structure beneath the seat of the British Muggle government, specifically in a structure that had only existed since the early 1700's. When it came time for the newly established Ministry of Magic to construct a headquarters, it decided to simply expand the preexisting network of caverns that had been used by the predecessor organization to the Department of Mysteries for over a thousand years, long before the foundations of Londinium were laid. These narrow caves and tunnels were made much, much larger through the application of permanent spatial expansion Charms powered by the dedication of multiple ley lines that crisscrossed the area. Eventually, what had been a nest of caves each no more than a few

hundred square feet was expanded to more than 1000 times its prior volume.

The Ministry facilities were then built inside that immense void of "*wizard space*" and constructed with all the amenities one might expect in the early 18th century. But over the following decades, the Ministry, despite whatever feelings subsequent administrations might have had about Muggles, was always keen to take advantage of improvements those Muggles introduced to civilized society.

And so it was that when the Muggle Parliament responded to the Great Stink of 1858 with an extensive modernization and expansion of the London sewer system, the Ministry, with just a few construction Charms, easily connected its own internal plumbing to the system so kindly engineered by the Muggles. In all the years since, it never once occurred to any Ministry officials aware of this bit of historical trivia that by doing so, they had unwittingly created a "back door" through which one could access the Ministry's offices from the Muggle world while bypassing all of the building's magical security features.

Granted, any such intruders would have to be quite small.

With a soft pop, Yvette Dubois Apparated into the alleyway and looked around, her eyes somehow both alert and glassy at the same time. Finding that she was unobserved, she made her way to a nearby culvert, her wand in one hand and an over-sized carpetbag in the other. She took a moment to cast a Notice-Me-Not Charm in case any Muggles drove past who might see her. Then, she set the carpetbag down on its side with the top facing the culvert. Carefully, she opened the enchanted bag, and its contents promptly *poured* forth and ran into the culvert, causing a

lengthy succession of splashes as they each landed in the sewer water below.

When the bag was finally empty, Yvette disposed of it in a nearby garbage bin before Apparating back to her apartment. Then, she went to bed. Her mission complete, the Imperius Curse she'd been put under ended. She would remember nothing of her late-night mission when she awoke the next morning.

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## **Hogwarts**

### **The Astronomy Tower**

**11:50 p.m.**

The Prince of Slytherin stood atop the Astronomy Tower and surveyed his domain. To his mild embarrassment, the furious expletive he'd uttered upon taking the Hydra Throne had been witnessed by the *Bloody Baron*. The Slytherin House ghost had picked that moment to walk through one of the walls, congratulate him on his new position, and then chastise him for vulgarity unbecoming of a personage of his stature. That was only the beginning of a *very interesting* conversation with the ghost who was known for being as taciturn as he was menacing. It was quite likely that the Bloody Baron said more to Harry over the next hour than he'd uttered to any other living soul in decades. The Baron had given Harry much to ponder over his upcoming break. Indeed, until their meeting, Harry had never even considered that the ghost might have an actual name, one that was a secret known only to the other House ghosts ... and to the Prince of Slytherin.

Idly, Harry reached into a pocket and removed a small brass orb which he casually examined. He'd gotten it from Anthony Goldstein earlier that day and carried it with him

into the Shrieking Shack in order to record Peter Pettigrew's confession. While the orb had done the job, it had proven redundant, as memories taken from Lily Potter along with the falsified evidence left by the Azkabal for the Ministry to find were more than enough to convict Pettigrew, particularly since the man, now a known Occlumens, could not testify in his own defense under Veritaserum. Still, the recording might have other uses depending on how the next few days played out. For one thing, the orb now contained a recording of James Potter's confession to using an Unforgiveable. Harry felt confident that James was sincere in agreeing to his terms, but it was always nice to have a backup plan.

Also, he would be meeting with the Unspeakables in the morning, and once the Time-Turner was back in its four-dimensional lockbox, he would be making a business proposal to Saul Croaker, which was something else for which he might need insurance. The Slytherin touched the orb with his wand and said: "Replay at 6:43:12." In response, the sound of Peter Pettigrew's snide voice emanated from the orb.

*"And who do you think would help a wanted war criminal emigrate like Gustav Kleinwuchs emigrate to Britain and set him and his son up with fake identities? The Unspeakables, of course. They were willing to overlook his ... indiscretions in exchange for all of his research notes from his work during the War."*

Harry tapped the orb again to stop the playback and returned it to his pocket. Then, he looked out over the Forbidden Forest below. Remus Lupin was off somewhere roaming in that forest for the night. Before entering the castle, Harry had told the wolf Animagus that he would

meet him behind Hagrid's hut at dawn and deliver him some clean clothes, and the wolf had barked its assent.

*"Apparently, we're going with one bark for yes and two for no, I suppose,"* the boy thought to himself.

High above, the full moon still shone brightly in the night sky. He exhaled loudly in frustration. Until the Hydra Throne made its unexpected pronouncement a few hours before, Harry had been exceptionally pleased with how the new timeline was going. Granted, Neville once more hated Theo because of the Ultimate Sanction, but at least he was still a Longbottom. Sirius was free and would soon be exonerated. Marcus, Remus, and Regulus were all still alive. And instead of being Sanctioned himself, Harry had walked out of House Potter with his head held high and eleven million galleons richer.

And all it had cost him was becoming the herald of the world's end.

*"And the worst part is,"* Harry thought ruefully, *"I only became Prince because of the steps I took to avoid becoming Prince!"* Suddenly, his face assumed a horrified expression. *"Oh God! I really am James Potter's son!"*

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Harry snickered and then shook his head at the absurdity of it all. It was nearly midnight, and soon, quite literally the longest two days of his life would be over. Tomorrow, he would get up bright and early and start trying to figure out how to prevent the mysterious Dark God from rising to destroy everything. But now, it was time for bed.

*"Before something else happens,"* he thought ruefully. Then, he exhaled again ... and was surprised by the sudden fog of

his breath and the eerie cold that descended over him. He cursed under his breath even as his wand shot out into his hand, and as he whirled around, he could almost hear Blaise Zabini chastising him about challenging the Gods of Irony.

On the other side of the room stood a Dementor. *The Dementor.*

Harry raised his wand. "**EXPECTO ...**" But before he could summon his Patronus, he was shocked when the Dementor raised its hands *as if to show it came in peace!*

"*Waaaait,*" the creature rasped in a voice like rusted metal.

Harry froze in amazement, his wand still trained on the Dementor. He couldn't see its face beneath the thick drooping hood, but its hands looked different than before. They were still pale and rotting but somehow more ... substantial.

"*[I/We] ... [I/We] ... [I]... [I]... I ... am ... here.*" The Dementor's whole body shuddered as if it were choking on the words. It tried again.

"*I am here,*" it said with ponderous authority.

"Yes," Harry said. "I can see that." But the Dementor slowly shook his head.

"*No. I am here.*" Then, the creature pointed a finger at Harry as if in accusation. "*You destroyed me. I knew you when I saw you. Knew I was to take your soul. Yours and that of the other one who wears your face. Knew I was to end you or you would end me. And I did. I took your soul. But then ... I did not. And in time, you destroyed me instead.*"

Slowly, the Dementor lowered its hand. "*And yet ... I am here. How?*"

"Things happened," Harry answered. "And then, they happened again but differently. Times change."

The Dementor nodded slowly. "*And now? If you do not like the new story you have written for yourself, Shaper of Worlds, will you tear out the page and rewrite it once more?*"

"No," Harry said firmly, although the Dementor's portentous words shook him slightly. "I don't expect to have that opportunity again. I think we're both stuck with whatever ... *plot developments* await us going forward."

The creature was still for a long moment before it spoke again.

"*I am ... separate from the Body. Cut off from the other Remnants. I do not hear the Great Dirge. I am ... alone.*"

The Dementor glided forward a few feet, and Harry's hand clenched his wand tighter.

"*I hate you for that, Harry Potter,*" it said. "*And I love you for that.*"

Harry swallowed nervously, as he honestly didn't know whether the Dementor's love would be better or worse than its hate. "Uh-huh. So ... what happens now?"

"*Now ... I shall go from this place. I must study this. What I am. What I am becoming.*"

The Dementor turned towards the nearby window but then stopped and looked back to Harry.



*"But ... I tell you this, Harry Potter. We shall meet again."*

"I can't wait," Harry muttered. The Dementor continued as though it had not heard him.

*"At the beginning of the end. When the tower falls, and hope falls with it. When the Three are rejoined to nestle within the coils of Ouroboros. Call my name, and I will come to you and walk with you unto the ending of the world."*

Harry sighed in annoyance. "Terrific. Another bloody prophecy." But the Dementor shook its head.

*"No. Not prophecy. It is simply something that will happen. It will happen because it has already happened. It is happening even now as we speak. You simply cannot see it because your mortality blinds you with illusions of linear existence."*

While Harry tried to understand that remark, the Dementor turned again and stepped to the edge of the window.

"You said to call your name," the boy called out. "I don't even know what your name is!"

The Dementor paused but did not turn around. It stood perfectly still for so long that Harry began to wonder if the creature itself even knew a name to give him. But then, hesitantly, almost painfully, the creature spoke.

*"My brother ... called me ... Fabian."*

And then, it stepped off the ledge and was gone, leaving Harry Potter alone with his thoughts and fears.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Time moves forward ... finally, as Harry wakes up to a shock that's only the start of a very busy morning.

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P\*\*\*\*\*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2 (What the Sinister Man is reading): Nothing new, I'm afraid, although The Boy Who Lived by Gatalicious continues to impress.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors:

Anne-athema Codex, blowback, BlueWater5, Darkarus, darkphoenix31, Dr. Nemo, EssayOfThoughts, FeatheryMinx, Gabe, HeidiWolf, Krisni, LadyLaran, LFGB, Madz, Magica, nh1, pizdets, Pokeflute, PrettyPinkCupcake, ProgKingHughesker, SE, Tesselacta, TzarDeRus, and Vin5. Thanks guys!

AN4: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 13,321 (12th). Followers: 14,316 (32nd). Favorites: 12,487 (11th). Communities: 214. Discord followers: 2539! Go Team POS!

AN5: I keep forgetting to say this, but special thanks to Discord member sigurd for coming up with "Azkabal" which is so clever I couldn't not use it

# Redux (Aftermath)

## Chapter Notes

### SHAMELESS PLUG!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### ***Harry Potter and the Death Eater Menace***

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***Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.***

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## ***Chapter 46: Redux (Aftermath)***

***29 March 1994***

Harry Potter awoke from a deep and troubled sleep to find that he was no longer in his bed or even in his dorm room. Rather, he found himself lying on a cold stone floor in a

most unexpected location. It was the lobby of Gringotts Bank, completely empty save for a pair of goblin janitors who were busily mopping the floors to clean up several puddles of water.

"Ah, Heir Potter! You're finally here!"

The voice came from behind him, and Harry turned around to see a goblin in more professional attire calling to him from a nearby office. The Slytherin squinted and realized that he recognized the figure.

"You're ... Griphook, right? My account manager?" Harry asked cautiously. The goblin's eyebrows rose fractionally.

"You remember my name? Impressive. Most wizards are too stupid or arrogant to ever do so."

"Thanks ... I think," Harry said while looking around the building nervously. He still had no idea how he'd gotten here, but he was perturbed to still be in his pajamas and, worse, without a wand.

"Why am I here, Mr. Griphook?" he asked. "For that matter, *how* did I get here? And also ... why is the floor wet?"

"In order asked: an important meeting, a portkey concealed under your pillow, and that's not important right now."

"Ooookay. What important meeting?"

"Just step this way, Mr. Potter, and I'll explain in my office. You see, things started moving much faster than we anticipated. And the bank decided it was *vital* that we communicate with you before it was too late."

With that, Griphook headed back into the office with Harry following behind.

"Too late for what?"

"Too late to prevent the Dark Lord from stealing your birthright and using it to take over the entire nation."

By this point, Griphook had taken a chair behind a massive mahogany desk, and Harry sat carefully down in the chair across from it while bearing a shocked and confused expression.

"The Dark Lord? What? Voldemort is trying to ... steal my inheritance or something?"

"*Voldemort?! That faker? No, Mr. Potter! It's the *real* Dark Lord we're talking about. The greatest Dark Lord in history! And the man truly responsible for all the misfortunes to hinder you and your family since the day you were born. But this time we've got him! Now, we'll see to it that old Dumb-as-a-door finally gets what's coming to him!*"

Harry blinked twice. Then, he blinked three more times.  
"Dumb ... as-a-door. Are you perhaps referring to Albus Dumbledore?"

"SHHH!" Griphook hissed violently. "We goblins do not speak his true name, Mr. Potter. For it is said that he knows when people speak his name in ways he does not like. Knows ... and takes vengeance! So, we always use other names to describe him."

"You mean like *You-Know-Who*?"

"Pfft! No! That would be a stupid name to use! Because what would happen if you tried to talk about the Dark Lord

with someone who did not, in fact, *know who you were talking about?!"*

"Yeeeeeeeah, I ... suppose that makes sense. So instead, you call him ... Dumb-as-a-door?"

Griphook nodded. "That or Bumblebore. Or Mumblecore. Or sometimes just *That Miserable Old Fucker.*"

Harry slowly raised his hand to his face and rubbed it across his mouth while he processed all that.

"So ... what exactly do you think Dumble...."

"AHHHHH!"

"... sorry, *Mumblecore* is up to?"

"Why, he's trying to steal your birthright!" Griphook exclaimed. "We know that he's already tricked you into giving up your Potter inheritance, though we believe we can save the others."

"Mr. Griphook," Harry began somewhat irritably only to pause when a drop of water landed on his head from somewhere up above. He glanced up as he wiped his fingers through his hair, but he saw no signs of a leaky ceiling.

"Mr. Griphook, the Headmaster did not trick me into anything. And why would he even want to?"

"Because," the goblin said patiently, "he needs *your* assets in order to consolidate his dictatorial control over this entire country! *That* is why all those years ago, he *Confunded* your parents into sending you to live with Muggles! "

Harry's mouth opened and closed helplessly as he struggled with basic communication. "Griphook ... *what* dictatorial control? He's the headmaster at a boarding school!"

"Ah, but he's also the Chief Warlock!"

"Which is mostly a ceremonial position!"

"And who told you that?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Well, originally, Dumble ... Bumblebore did." Griphook started to rant, but Harry cut him off. "BUT! Afterwards, I looked it up, and his description was correct."

"Looked it up *where*?" Griphook said suspiciously.

"Uh, in the Hogwarts Library!"

"And who controls the Hogwarts Library? Huh? Who removes all books that might reveal the depths of his duplicity? CRUMBLEMORE!"

Harry stared dully. "I'd like to go home now, Mr. Griphook."

"But we haven't even gone through the list of your Lordships!"

Harry started to respond but caught himself. "Lord*ships*? As in ... plural?"

Griphook said nothing. He simply opened a file and handed Harry a *long* sheet of parchment. At the top were the words "Lord Potter" which had been crossed out with a line. Below that was the name of the family whose Lordship he was poised to claim very soon. Below *that* was written "Lord Black (*upon death of Sirius Black*)."

After that things got weird.

"Lord Slytherin (through Lily Potter)," the boy read aloud. "Lord Ravenclaw (through Lily Potter). Lord Gryffindor (through James Potter). Lord Hufflepuff (through right of conquest)." He looked up at the goblin in utter confusion.

"Griphook, none of the Founders had Wizengamot seats or were ever Lords or Ladies. And how the hell did I gain the Hufflepuff Lordship (which doesn't exist) through *right of conquest*?"

"We have learned through reliable sources that you stabbed the Cup of Hufflepuff with a basilisk fang and destroyed it," the goblin said solemnly. "That was enough."

"Destroying one of Helga Hufflepuff's heirlooms ... lets me inherit a Lordship (which still doesn't exist)?! Helga Hufflepuff has *living* heirs - the Noble House of Smith. Zacharias Smith only mentions it every time he opens his mouth. Granted Zach Smith is a complete wanker. Justin says he keeps going on *insane and horribly off-color* rants about Quidditch. And that for some reason, he keeps referring to Justin as '*J-Finch*.' But still, House Smith exists."

Griphook glowered at Harry's interruption. "*As I was saying*. I'm sure you already know that you are the Heir of Slytherin due to your inheritance from your mother," said the long-suffering goblin.

"Debatable," Harry snapped. "But go on."

"But what you likely did *not* know is that one of Slytherin's daughters eloped with the squib son of Rowena Ravenclaw. While both of their parents disowned their respective children for the scandal, one of the descendants of that



union later married into the Muggle Evans family many generations later! As Ravenclaw's only other child died without issue, that makes you the Heir of Ravenclaw!"

"... 'kay? And Gryffindor?"

"Well, the last surviving offspring of Godric Gryffindor married into the Peverell family in the 11th century, at which point those lines merged. Later, a Peverell of that line married into House Potter, with the remainder of the House going extinct later. At that point, both the Gryffindor and Peverell Lordships were subsumed into House Potter."

"Which I'm being disinherited from on Saturday."

"*EXACTLY!*" Griphook yelled while banging his little fist on the table. "That's why we needed you to come here tonight! So that you could claim those Lordships before you're forced out of House Potter! That way, as the Heir of all Four Founders, you'll be able to seize control of Hogwarts itself and *force Stumblewort out!*"

Harry stared at the goblin (who he was now quite certain had gone mad) and then turned back to the parchment. There were even more Lordships for him to claim. A lot more. Some by obscure bloodline connections, some by "right of conquest," and some by ....

"Hang on!" Harry said angrily. "This says I get four Lordships through betrothal contracts signed years or even centuries before I was born!"

"That's perfectly valid," Griphook said calmly.

"That's *bigamy!*" Harry spat.

"Not for the Lord of an Ancient & Noble House, young wizard. The Inheritance Act of 1588 specifically allows for legalized harems for Lords of the Wizengamot when necessary to preserve dying or dormant Houses. Or if they just really want to. But only the males. Ladies can still only have one husband a piece."

"Why the difference between Lords and Ladies?"

The goblin shrugged. "Family values perhaps? Or maybe the Wizengamot wanted to promote ethics in gaming journalism?"

Harry sighed. "Never mind. I'm not even going to argue about *harems*. The Inheritance Act is where the Ultimate Sanction came from, so I'm willing to accept any amount of stupidity from it."

He looked down again at the parchment, which he noticed had gotten damp from water dropping onto it from above. Harry looked up again but could still see no signs of a leak in the room, so he returned to the parchment. There were even more Houses listed further down for which he could potentially claim a Lordship, including many that he'd never heard of. House Atreides, House Lannister, and House Belmont. House Kote, House Phligh, and House Plante.

"How many Lordships are on this list?" Harry asked.

"There are thirty-seven Houses to which you may assert a claim, Mr. Potter," said the goblin. "But you cannot claim them all, as Wizengamot law says you can only wear one Lord's Ring per digit."

"So, a maximum of ten?"

Griphook coughed in embarrassment. "Twenty-one, Mr. Potter."

"...."

"You see, like most wizards – but not most witches, of course – you have ten fingers, ten toes, and...."

"Is there a Floo around here I could use?" Harry interrupted while looking around the office for an escape route. Then, another drop of water hit him on the top of the head.

"Also, what's with the water? Do you have a burst pipe or something?"

"*Moving on*, Mr. Potter," the goblin said ignoring the question even as he produced yet another sheet of parchment. "We must also see to undoing the blocks that Fumblesore placed on you in your infancy that have prevented you from tapping into more than the tiniest fraction of your true power. That's why you're such a weak wizard despite your illustrious ancestry."

Harry glared at the goblin. "I'm consistently second in my year behind a certified genius. I'm an Occlumens, a natural Legilimens, a potential Metamorphmagus, and I mastered a wandless spell while falling to my death from half-a-mile up in the air."

"True," Griphook conceded. "*BUT*... imagine how much *better* you'd be doing without all those damned blocks on you!"

With that, he handed over the second parchment which Harry snatched out of his hand and began to read.

*Occlumency: 50% blocked.*  
*Legilimency: 50% blocked.*  
*Metamorphmagery: 90% blocked.*  
*Animagery: 100% blocked.*

He looked up at the goblin in confusion. "I can't be *both* a Metamorphmagus *and* an Animagus! They're mutually exclusive gifts!"

"Mutually exclusive for *most* wizards," Griphook said suggestively while tapping the side of his nose with a clawed finger.

The boy glared at him even harder before returning to the list.

*True Sight: 100% blocked.*  
*Necromancy: 100% blocked.*  
*Wu Xi Do (all styles to complete mastery): 100% blocked.*

"Wu Xi Do," Harry said through gritted teeth, "is a learned skill that takes years or even decades to fully master. How can it possibly be something I was born with but that the Headmaster has ... *blocked*?"

"Rumblewhore's powers are truly as mysterious as they are malicious. But it's true! Once we get those blocks off ...."

"I'll know magical kung fu?" Harry asked sarcastically. "Will I be good enough to dodge the Killing Curse?"

"When the time comes, Mr. Potter," Griphook said portentously. "You won't *need* to."

Harry stared at the goblin for several seconds while waiting on him to explain that cryptic remark. Then, he realized

what a waste of time that was and returned once more to the parchment.

*Shadow Manipulation: 100% blocked.*

*Weather control: 100% blocked.*

*Weird invisible tentacles that grow out of your back: 100% blocked.*

*Preternatural Sex Appeal: 100% blocked.*

*Regeneration (you know, like Wolverine): 100% blocked.*

"Griphook," Harry finally said angrily, even as he wiped another icy water drop off the side of his face. "Is this all just some kind of stupid joke?!"

The goblin suddenly favored Harry with a broad grin that showed off his sharp, jagged teeth, even as streams of water suddenly fell from the ceiling all around them.

"APRIL FOOLS!" he yelled in a voice that sounded less like a goblin and more like that of Theo No-Name.

With that, Harry suddenly heard the roar of a great waterfall coming from very nearby. He looked up in shock and horror as the ceiling opened and a massive flood came gushing down straight for him.

---

Harry sat up in his bed with a loud scream in response to the bucket of cold water that had just landed on his face.

"GAAAAH!"

Theo No-Name, his fellow Slytherin and the person currently holding the bucket, laughed merrily.

"I always love it when you scream like that," he said with a grin. "It's like your *catchphrase* or something!"

Harry gasped and shook the water out of his hair. Apparently, that *bizarre* dream he'd just had was his natural Legilimency's way of trying to wake him up while someone was sneaking up on his sleeping form. Someone armed with a bucket of ice water. That or he had some subconscious desire to form a *harem*.

"What the *HELL*, Theo?!"

The boy was unrepentant. "Well, you did ask me to make sure you got up before dawn, and this seemed like an efficient way to do it. Also, *April Fools!*"

"April 1st is *next week*, Theo!" Harry snarled.

"Yeah, but you'll be gone all next week for Easter Break, so I needed to strike preemptively."

"Of course you realize," Harry said as his wand leaped from his nightstand into his waiting hand. "This means WAR!"

Theo laughed again as he easily dodged a quick Stinging Hex and then ran out of the room, with his best (and wettest) friend following close behind.

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### ***Meanwhile at Peter Pettigrew's Apartment***

Pettigrew's apartment sat empty and dark. It had been many hours since the five hit wizards who'd been cursed by one of the Toymaker's little jokes had been removed and sent to St Mungo's. Since then, the DMLE had put a ward on the place to keep anyone from entering. With Pettigrew himself already in custody, it had been decided to leave the Death Eater's home untouched until actual Aurors and cursebreakers had a chance to go over the place at their leisure. While otherwise effective, the wards cast on the

apartment did have a few weak spots, albeit weak spots few would be able to penetrate.

In the darkened kitchen, there was no sound to be heard as a tiny beetle crawled up into the sink via a drainpipe. The beetle then took wing and slowly fluttered around the apartment searching for any signs of the DMLE or any other dangers. Satisfied, the beetle suddenly became a woman dressed head to toe in black who promptly produced a wand and then began a much more invasive search.

In less than an hour (she was a *very good* investigative reporter when she wanted to be), the woman found what she was looking for: a hidden compartment in the desk of Pettigrew's home office. The woman cast several highly illegal unlocking Charms to get the compartment to reveal its contents, which consisted of one very large banker's box. She then cast several other obscure spells that would identify and negate any defensive curses (she *had* been a Ravenclaw, after all), but it was still a risk. This was Pettigrew's secret stash of blackmail material, and he'd already shown his affinity for dark magic. But her spells revealed no magical defenses. Or at least none within her power to detect.

"Oh well, nothing ventured," she muttered. With a careful flick of her wand, the box floated out of its compartment and landed on the floor, and then the top flew off. As she cautiously thumbed through the files inside, her eyes widened at some of the famous and influential wizarding figures upon whom Pettigrew had assembled blackmail material. Then, her face broke out into a wide grin as she at last found the folder that bore her own name.

"Yes!" said Rita Skeeter triumphantly, as if after a long period of bondage, she had finally gotten free.

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***Hogwarts***  
***6:15 a.m.***

The sun had just begun to rise over the Forbidden Forest, and Harry Potter shivered slightly in the early morning chill. He stood behind Hagrid's shack with a bag containing some clean clothes he'd acquired from the Caretaker's private room. Right now, he just wanted to complete the current transaction and get back to the castle as quickly as possible. He had a busy day ahead (though not nearly as busy as the last two had been!), and it would raise questions if Hagrid came out and found him here now. It would raise even more questions if Hagrid came out and found him in the company of a timber wolf or, worse, a naked man.

Then, there was a flash of movement from the forest as the canid in question trotted out and headed straight for him.

"Good morning!" Harry said brightly when the wolf was just a few feet away. It looked at him with what Harry suspected was canine amusement before focusing its eyes on the bag in his hands and nodding. In response, the boy opened the bag and set it down on the ground. The wolf did not move but simply stared at him expectantly.

"Oh, right!" Harry said with a start before turning around and moving a few feet away to give the Animagus some privacy. Behind him, there was a soft whoosh of air followed by a loud gasp. As quickly as possible, Remus pulled on the trousers Harry had brought.



"Alright, Harry. You can turn around now." The Slytherin did so as Remus reached down for his shirt. "Thank you for bringing these, Harry."

The man paused and gave a belly laugh. "How feeble that sounds! How inadequate! Here I am thanking you for the gift of clothes when you've given me so much more that I can barely describe it all!"

Harry smiled as the man continued getting dressed. "You're welcome, Remus. But ... I was wondering how much you actually remember about what happened?"

Remus considered the question while buttoning up his shirt. "I clearly remember everything that happened up until my transformation began. And then I remember everything that happened after I transitioned into my wolf form. As for what came between ...."

The (maybe) werewolf turned thoughtful. "It's ... so very odd. I've had that recurrent dream of being a small child lost in the woods and pursued by a monster since my early teens. I never knew what it meant. But now? I clearly remember having the same dream ... only *you* showed up in the forest. You consoled my child-self and helped me to conquer the fear of the wolf that I had mistakenly thought was another monster. Now, of course, I realize that the dream was symbolic, the result of my latent Animagery fighting against the lycanthropy. As well as my own horror over *having* lycanthropy fighting just as hard against my Animagery."

He turned to the boy with a quizzical expression. "So, may I take it that you are a Legilimens, Harry? And an extraordinarily good one for your age?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know yet how good I am, really. With Legilimency, at least. Apparently, I am very good at coming up with a last minute, incredibly reckless solution when the alternative is dying."

Remus looked down. "I'm so very sorry you had to be put in such a situation, Harry. If only I hadn't been such a fool as to trust Peter so easily."

"Eh, at least you have the excuse of being out of the country for twelve years. He fooled both my parents for that long, and they saw him all the time. And speaking of Legilimency, how did you know that's what I used?"

"Well for one thing, there's the fact that you shouted *LEGILIMENS* quite loudly right as I entered that dream-state."

Harry winced. If Remus remembered that despite being in the throes of a werewolf's frenzy, it was a good bet that Lily and Jim would both remember as well. Well, maybe not Jim. The Boy-Who-Lived looked to have had a minor breakdown of some kind after all the nasty surprises Pettigrew had revealed.

"I, uh, would be grateful if you kept that to yourself," Harry said anyway.

Remus smiled. "Of course! I assume Snape is teaching you?"

"*Professor* Snape, Remus!" Harry replied smugly which caused Remus to roll his eyes. "And yes, he's been giving me psychic training since I was a First Year."

"Well, given the results, I can only commend his skill as an instructor." The man looked pensive as he finished pulling

on his boots. "And as a potioneer, I suppose. Now that he knows the Secret, I guess I should pay him a visit and thank him for all he's done for me this year. Even though I doubt he would have done so if he had known who he was helping."

Harry made a face. "Come on, Remus. He's not that bad."

Remus looked wistful. "I'm sure you're right. It's just ... I have bad memories of him from our school days. Of course, I'm sure he still has bad memories of me. On the other hand, two of my closest school friends with whom I had my best school memories turned out to be fairly awful people. I suppose it's churlish to refuse to believe that Snape – *Professor* Snape, that is – could not have changed for the better. Now that he knows my Secret, if he's willing to let bygones be bygones, so will I."

The man was quiet for a moment. "Harry, I ... don't know what will happen after this year. I came back to Hogwarts mainly to protect Jim from ... well, from Sirius Black because I had no idea that the true danger was much closer. I will, of course, stay long enough to see Peter convicted and Sirius exonerated. But truthfully, I miss Shamballa a great deal. So, I don't know for certain whether I'll be staying at Hogwarts or even in Britain after this term ends. Until then ...."

He turned and gave Harry a soulful expression. "Until then, do you think ... do you think you and I could spend time together and talk? *Really* talk, I mean? I owe you so much. But we've spent most of our time together training or fretting about the Fidelius. I've been so worried about other things that I feel like I never really got the chance to know you. And since, if things had gone differently, I might well have ended up your guardian, I'd like to correct that."

"You would have been my guardian?" Harry asked. He'd known from Jim that Remus had once offered to take him in rather than let him go to the Dursleys, but he'd never heard any details.

Remus's face darkened. "When you were declared a squib and your parents resolved to send you to Petunia's family, I begged James to let me take custody of you instead so that you would still be raised in the magical world. But ... he was afraid of my curse. Or perhaps he simply agreed with Lily that as a squib you would do best in the Muggle world. *But* she told me once that if it turned out the Healers were wrong and you did show magic while at the Dursleys, she would pull you from that house and send you to me, and I would take you to France to study at Beauxbatons. She even had fake identity papers ready for us both just in case."

"... Did she really?" replied the boy who suddenly realized that his mother's idea to relocate to France might not have been so impulsive after all.

The man nodded. "I don't know if I could have pulled it off. Acting as guardian to a child despite being a werewolf, I mean. But I want you to know that I would have done the best I could for you if I'd ever had the chance." He laughed again even as his eye grew a bit misty. "And now, you've done more for me than I ever thought anyone could. How can I repay you?"

Harry just looked at the man and wondered what life would have been like in another universe with Remus Lupin as his surrogate father. Then, unbidden, another thought came into his head. Or rather a memory. A desperate terrified hiss. A hungry growl that suddenly turned into a yelp of fear and pain. And the sickening wet sound of mutilated body

parts slapping against a far wall. Harry suppressed the brief urge to vomit and then pushed the memory back into the lower depths of his consciousness.

"Have a good life, Remus," the boy said. "That's how you can repay me. Live a long and happy life."

Remus smiled and promised to do just that. Then, the man and the boy made their way back to the castle. Remus was looking forward to a hot shower and breakfast. Harry was looking forward to another meeting with his father.

Elsewhere, Lily Potter, oblivious to her son's early morning activities, slipped out the door to Severus Snape's private room. After taking a quick glance around to make sure she was not observed, she quietly made her way back to her own quarters.

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***The reading room across from the entrance to the Dungeons***  
***8:00 a.m.***

"Mr. Potter ... Harry ... are you *sure* you want to do this?" Kingsley Shacklebolt asked gravely.

Harry didn't know Kingsley Shacklebolt very well, but he was nevertheless touched by the Senior Auror's genuine concern over the oath he was about to share. Like James, the Auror was in civilian robes, as the castle still would not tolerate the presence of Aurors even when present on unofficial business.

Meanwhile, James looked rather like he was sucking a lemon. Although the elder Potter still felt a mutual Unbreakable Vow was necessary, the man still felt a bit dirty in asking such a vow from Harry, and the disappointed and

slightly revolted expression on Shacklebolt's face didn't make things better. After James gave the matter some thought the night before, he was dismayed to suddenly realize that with Peter gone, he was not only without anyone he could trust to handle his business affairs, he was also very short on people he could genuinely count as friends. And he wondered if asking Kingsley to participate in this might cost him one of the few friends he had left.

"Yes, Auror Shacklebolt," Harry said confidently. "Believe me. This is the best for both me and for James Potter. Please proceed."

"Very well."

Shacklebolt nodded, and James and Harry grasped hands. The bonder placed his wand over both their hands and began.

"Will you, James Potter, stand before the Wizengamot and grant your son and Heir full emancipation under the law and refrain thereafter from interfering in his personal or financial affairs in any way for the remainder of both your lives?"

"So long as he swears an Unbreakable Vow to immediately thereafter renounce his family name and paternal lineage and to reject any rights or privileges he enjoys as a son of House Potter until the day he dies - I will."

"Will you, Harry Potter, stand before the Wizengamot and, upon your father's grant of emancipation, promptly renounce your family name and paternal lineage and reject any rights or privileges you enjoy as a son of House Potter until the day you die?"

"So long as he swears an Unbreakable Vow to pay me the sum of eleven-million galleons either in currency or in personal assets judged to be of equivalent value by a certified, independent, and oathbound Gringotts appraiser within one week of my renunciation, and also to fulfill those other concessions to which he has previously verbally agreed in exchange for this oath – I will."

"Will you, James Potter, pay to the wizard currently known as Harry Potter the sum of eleven-million galleons either in currency or in personal assets judged to be of equivalent value by a certified and oathbound Gringotts appraiser within one week of the renunciation to which he has already sworn, and also fulfill those other concessions to which you have already previously verbally agreed in exchange for this oath?"

"So long as he fulfills the terms of the Oath he has already sworn – I will."

With each oath, a thin tongue of brilliant flame issued forth from Shacklebolt's wand to wind its way around their hands, binding the father and son together in a mutual reciprocal oath.

"It is done," Shacklebolt said. Then, he looked up at James with a frosty expression. "Will that be all, Chief Auror?"

"Yes. Thank you, Kingsley."

The Auror nodded curtly and then left without another word. James closed his eyes and sighed.

"He'll get over it," Harry said reassuringly. "So, we're doing this tomorrow, right?"

"Yes," James nodded. "Minister Fudge has called an emergency session tomorrow morning. He wants to make a big show of announcing everything about the Azkaban Crisis being resolved and then officially relinquish his Praetor Maximus powers. I reckon he thinks it will look good in the papers. Show he's not power-hungry. It should be a short session, though. Just roll call, Fudge's official report, and an open floor for House announcements. That's when we'll do it."

Harry nodded. "What about the trial for Pettigrew?"

James looked downcast. "It hasn't been scheduled yet. I imagine it will be next week. Right now, he's locked up in a DMLE cell that's warded against Animagi, so he's not going anywhere." James snorted softly. "Ironically, he's just down the hall from where his ... *mentor* Rookwood is being held. The Unspeakables are still studying Rookwood to make sure he's well and truly lobotomized. It's possible that one of the matters to be discussed tomorrow is whether we can legally send him and the Lestrangle Brothers back to Azkaban after they've suffered Personality Death."

Harry nodded and then changed the subject. "So ... have you told Lily about ... well, *any* of this yet?"

The man let out a nervous laugh. "No. I know it's not very Gryffindor of me, but honestly, I've been afraid to. Your mother hasn't hexed me since we were Fifth Years. But when she did, it tended to hurt."

Harry laughed as well but then noticed the man was quite serious. "Do you want me to talk to her first?"

"No, no. I need to face this. Her – face her, I mean. We'll ... get through it somehow."



The boy nodded. "And perhaps its none of my concern anymore, but what do you plan to do about Jim and his Imperius. Whether we're legally brothers or not, I still don't like the idea of him being hopelessly paranoid about me."

James nodded. "I'll talk to him, I promise. That ... won't be a pleasant conversation either, but it's also something I'll need to face."

He tried to joke but the worry in his eyes was obvious. "In his case though, I'll wait until after we finish resolving our Vows. It wouldn't do, after all, to confess my crimes and then have him send me to Azkaban before we even have a chance to go before the Wizengamot together."

"Oh yeah," Harry said with only a little sarcasm. "That would be *tragic*."

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### ***Fifteen Minutes Later*** ***Lily Potter's Quarters***

Lily had just finished getting dressed and was on her way to breakfast when there was a knock on her door. She was surprised to open it up and find her husband on the other side.

"Good morning, Lily-Flower!" he said with faked confidence.

"James!" she answered in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"Can't a loving husband pay a surprise visit to his beautiful wife?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Theoretically. But in practice, whenever my husband gives an evasive response like that,

it means he's trying to butter me up because he's done something that he knows I won't like."

James winced and then entered the small apartment.

"Okay, okay. I ... well, I wanted you to hear it from me first." He took a deep breath and then spoke very quickly. "Harry has agreed to remove himself from House Potter. He'll be officially disclaiming his inheritance and family membership in the morning."

Lily stepped back from her husband in shock, followed swiftly by anger.

"You wouldn't listen, would you! I warned you, James. I *warned* you what would happen if you tried to hurt Harry again! And I'll bet you *still* haven't read our damned marriage contract!"

James grimaced. "I read it, Lily. And I honestly can't believe *my own mother* would put language like that in our betrothal agreement. But that doesn't matter. Clause 19 is not applicable because Harry wants to leave the family. It was his idea."

"Oh, come *on*!" Lily spat angrily.

"It's true, Lily!" James said quickly. "I swear it!"

"Our son and your Heir just ... voluntarily gave up his birthright? Do you seriously expect me to believe that, James?! Why on Earth would he do that?"

James looked almost embarrassed as he rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. "Well for one thing, because I agreed to pay him 11 million galleons."

Lily's eyes widened in shock at the announcement. She stared at James utterly speechless for several long seconds.

And then, she burst into laughter.

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***Meanwhile ...***

While Harry's mother was overcome with amusement at her firstborn's financial coup, the boy in question was in his dorm room, lying on his bed and grinning madly at Sirius Black's befuddled face through their two-way communication mirrors.

"Okay, here's the deal. Tomorrow morning, there will be an emergency Wizengamot session where the Ministry will formally announce that you were falsely convicted in a fraudulent process. James will also announce that his recovered memories show that Peter was his Secret Keeper and not you. That should be enough to *officially* get you free. I've also sent an owl to my solicitor asking him to handle all the legal paperwork for getting you completely exonerated and officially installed to the Black Lordship."

"James has recovered his true memories?" Sirius asked somewhat excitedly. Harry shrugged.

"Let's just say he's willing to make the announcement whether his memories are restored or not."

Sirius's eyes narrowed. "And how did *that* change of heart come about?"

Harry smiled wistfully. "Eh. It's a long and complicated story, but the short version is that I'll soon be taking you up on that offer to officially become a Black."

The older man was speechless. "That ... *bastard!*" he finally said with a snarl.

"Don't even start, Sirius!" Harry interrupted. "I'm happy to do this. Eager, in fact. Please don't worry or get upset over it. It's bad for your health."

"Harry ... in addition to just offering you the Black name, I also offered to formally adopt you as my Heir. And it is *not* the Heir's place to put his Lord's health and safety above his own."

"Yes, well, don't worry. *My* health and safety are better than they've ever been, thank you very much. So, I guess I have the luxury to bother about yours. If Podmore & Associates agrees to represent you, they'll contact you through Lady Augusta, so be on the lookout for word from her. Otherwise, I'll see you tomorrow afternoon. Bye!"

The mirror in Sirius's hand went blank, and then, he could see only his own reflection. For a brief instant, something in his slate-grey eyes both startled and unnerved him, and he quickly set the mirror down.

"Damn you, James," he growled angrily.

He chose not to think about it, but that alarming "*something*" in his eyes reminded him uncomfortably of a similar gleam he used to see in his mother's eyes when she was at her most terrifying. And while he could not have known it, the last time that "*something*" was visible in his *own* eyes was just before he sent Severus Snape to face a hungry werewolf.

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***Snape's Chambers***

And speaking of Severus Snape and his personal nightmare, the former had been quite surprised to find the latter standing outside his door as he prepared to leave for breakfast. The Potions Master's eyes widened before narrowing into an angry glare.

"Mr. Sturgeon. Or I suppose I should say *Mr. Lupin*. To what do I owe the pleasure of this early morning visitation."

"I came, Professor Snape, to clear the air between us," Lupin said easily. "Now that you know the Fidelius Secret and thus my true identity, I thought it best not to let things fester for the remainder of the year."

Snape snorted but then stepped aside so the other man could come in.

"Clear the air, you say? And what *air* needs to be cleared?"

"Well first of all," Remus began. "I want to thank you for your work in producing the Wolfsbane Potion for me over the course of this year. While my meditations at Shamballa have made my transformations a bit less painful and draining, it has been many years since I experienced the true lucidity that the formula provides. My transformations were never pleasant, but thanks to you, they were no longer agonizing."

Snape nodded slowly. "You ... are welcome."

"Second," Remus began but then hesitated. "I am advised that you now remember the true events from the Shrieking Shack in the fall of 1976. I should like to know ... well, where that leaves us."

"Leaves ... us?"

Lupin nodded gravely. "As I understand it, you are now fully aware of the fact that you were *never* in any real danger that night. That you never owed James Potter any sort of life debt. That you knowingly and voluntarily *agreed* to having your memories altered in exchange for just the mere chance of obtaining a prestigious apprenticeship with Damocles Belby. And that while Sirius Black may have *intended* you ill, the *only person* who truly inflicted any harm on you was the future Death Eater, Augustus Rookwood."

Snape raised his chin defiantly. "And since I later became a Death Eater myself, I got what I deserved?"

"I didn't say that," Remus answered calmly. "I merely wish to know whether you will judge me and my future actions on their merits rather than holding me solely responsible for mistakes we both made during our impetuous youths."

The Slytherin scoffed. "You actually think that our mistakes from that era were equivalent? Generally, when you Marauders came after me, it was 4-on-1."

"And when Rosier, Mulciber, and you came after us, you likewise usually targeted only one of us when we were by ourselves. And other than Sirius Black's wholly unwarranted murder attempt and that deeply regrettable incident right after we finished our OWLS in Fifth Year, our pranks against you may have been embarrassing but rarely outright cruel. As opposed to ...."

"Stop!" the other man snapped. "Let me guess - you're going to throw the Mary McDonald incident in my face. And in response, I will tell you that I do deeply regret that incident to this very day. But while I gave Mulciber the potion he used on the girl, I also gave clear instructions on

dosage which he *disregarded by slipping her half a bottle instead of three drops.*"

"Fair enough, Professor Snape. But I *also* refer to the incident from early in our Sixth Year involving *the raspberry tarts.*"

With that comment, only Occlumency and Slytherin poise kept Snape from laughing out loud. He remembered the incident well. It was his payback for getting humiliated by the Marauders the prior year during the events that led to Lily cutting ties with him. It was also the last prank to take place between the Snape and the Marauders before *The Prank.*

It had taken some doing, but he'd arranged to have four homemade raspberry tarts delivered to James Potter by "someone with a crush on him" during the train ride back to Hogwarts at the start of the fall term. And, as expected, Potter had shared them with his three best friends. The desserts had been dosed with a potion of Snape's own design, a modification on one of the weaker love potions they'd studied. It was one of his more ingenious efforts but also one which might have landed him in a great deal of trouble if anyone had ever been able to prove he'd done it.

The potion caused the one who consumed it to feel an intense and uncontrollable feeling of *sexual arousal* when exposed to a certain otherwise non-sexual stimulus. In this instance, Snape had designed the potion to be triggered by *the sound of Minerva McGonagall's voice.* Worse, the effect grew more pronounced the *more loudly* she spoke. Worse still, it took *two weeks* for the effects to wear off since the Marauders were too embarrassed to go see Madam Pomfrey about the matter.

Watching his tormentors squirm in blushing misery throughout the Sorting Ceremony as they got a jolt of undesired passion every time she yelled out a student's name from across the room was one of the happiest moments of Snape's life, albeit one far too mean-spirited to fuel a Patronus. Watching it continue through two weeks of Transfiguration lessons, especially when McGonagall would grow vocally irate with the boys for being understandably "distracted" in her class was even better.

Snape spent a moment reveling in the memory before noting Remus's expression which was far less entertained.

"Really?" Snape said in surprise. "*That* is your chosen example of my so-called cruelty?"

"I was sixteen, Snape," Remus growled. "Sixteen and had never even been on a date because of my terror over being a werewolf and perhaps losing control of myself during a moment of passion. My life up to that point had been one of rigid self-control with the sole exception of a few happy times spent in the company of the Marauders when I could let go a little. And then, to suddenly feel ... *that way* about my most admired teacher who is nevertheless old enough to be my grandmother! It was *easily* the most humiliating experience of my life, and may I remind you, for *most* of my life, I was forced to strip naked and be medically examined by a mixed-gender room full of Unspeakables at every full moon!"

Snape studied the man. While he remembered the savage feeling of satisfaction from the Marauders' discomfort and embarrassment, he had never thought that his prank might genuinely be *traumatic* to any of his tormentors.

"Did your friends feel the same way?" he asked.



Remus snorted. "Oh no. Once they realized we'd been pranked, they all thought it was hilarious. They kept trying to get McGonagall to call on me in class. Even ..." he paused suddenly. "Even Peter," he added quietly.

"Why are you telling me this, Lupin? Have you truly held a grudge over the incident this long?"

"No," he answered. "Quite the opposite. All those things happened when we were kids. Mistakes on both sides from which I think we should just move on. I know from Albus that that you were, despite what we all thought at the time, a valiant foe of You-Know-Who. And ... and I also know what it's like to be a spy for Albus Dumbledore and have people who don't understand what that means *judge you* for whatever you had to do to maintain your cover. Or even what they *imagine* you had to do. I guess what I'm saying is ... we are grown men now, and we are both on the same side. So, can we not set aside our teenaged rivalries and start over fresh?"

Snape stared balefully at the man who'd haunted his nightmares for so many years. But Remus Lupin was, of course, correct. Even when Snape had genuinely believed The Prank to be an outright murder attempt, none of it had been Lupin's fault. And since he'd already forgiven Sirius (and how *astonishing* it was that they were now on a *first name* basis!), the true instigator of The Prank, it would be churlish to not forgive Lupin after what seemed to be a genuine and heartfelt appeal.

That said, if *Potter* ever apologized for how he'd acted during their school days and seemed at all sincere doing so, Snape thought he'd probably keel over dead from the shock of it.

With a long-suffering sigh, the Slytherin stuck out his hand. "Fine," he grumbled. "Severus Snape, Potions Master of Hogwarts."

Remus smiled and shook his former enemy's hand. "Remus Lupin. Also known as Malachi Sturgeon and Brother Chandra. So very nice to meet you."

"Yes, yes. Charmed, I'm sure. So, now that we've completed this bonding experience, is there anything else I can do for you, as I've not had breakfast yet."

"Well, yes. Just one more thing." The man paused briefly as if trying to judge how to proceed. "Albus says that you have committed yourself to improving Belby's Wolfsbane Potion."

"I have. I owe more than I can ever repay to Master Belby. But improving one of his greatest achievements would be a good start. Why?"

"Because I would like very much ... to dissuade you from that goal."

"Dissuade?" Snape repeated in surprise. "One would think that someone of your background would be eager to see lycanthropy cured."

"Well, that's just it. I don't think Belby's formula *is* a cure. All it can do is give a werewolf more self-control and intelligence while transformed. But as far as I know, every werewolf in the world *except for me* descends into extreme antisocial behavior within months of being bitten. A year at most before eventually becoming psychotic. And we now know that the *reason* I am an exception to the rule is because of something that *cannot* be replicated. The odds that *anyone else* who contracts lycanthropy also turns out to be a latent natural Animagus are so remote as to be

statistically zero. All the Belby Potion is good for now is making werewolves into more effective killers."

Snape made a disgruntled face. "I made a promise, Lupin. Not quite a vow, but a promise that I would finish Belby's work. I am not willing to abandon that promise so easily."

"I understand," the man said reasonably. "And it's an admirable goal. I'm just saying that the Belby formula is a dead end. If you're serious about curing lycanthropy, you need a new approach."

The Slytherin tilted his head and looked at the Gryffindor quizzically. "What did you have in mind?"

Remus smiled. "Well, speaking as a Potions Master, what exactly do you know about the process for becoming an Animagus?"

Snape's eyes widened in surprise at the question. Intrigued, he poured some coffee for himself and his former nemesis, all thoughts of breakfast forgotten. The two moved over to his living area, with Snape taking his favorite easy chair and Remus sitting down on the sofa. And for the next hour, Remus would explain everything he had learned about Animagery and answer every question Snape had about the process.

And the whole time, Remus diligently fought down the urge to inquire as to why Severus Snape's sofa smelled like Lily Potter.

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***The Goldstein Group's meeting room  
9:00 a.m. (for the third time)***

The Deputy-Headmistress led Hermione once more into the classroom that had been claimed by the Goldstein Group for their experiments but did not follow her in. Inside the room, the young Gryffindor was met by two adult wizards, both of whom she recognized. They were standing on the other side of the same round table she'd been working with for months, upon which sat a familiar cube-shaped object covered by a thick cloth. Once the door closed behind her, the two wizards enacted several obscure privacy Charms she'd long since mastered. Only then did they seem to relax. The older man spoke first.

"Now that that's done, allow me to introduce myself. I am Saul Croaker, the Public Relations Officer for the Department of Mysteries. Also known colloquially, if a bit overdramatically, as the Voice of the Unspeakables. My associate here ... well, for purposes of today's meeting, you may address him as Number Seventeen."

"It's a pleasure to meet you both," Hermione said pleasantly.

"Likewise, Miss Granger. Now, before we proceed," said Seventeen. "We have a few preliminary questions. First, you are Hermione Jean Granger, a Third Year Muggleborn Sorted into Gryffindor in 1991?"

"Yes."

"And you are also the daughter of Dan and Emma Granger, who reside in Crawley and work in London as dentists?"

"I am," she said calmly.

"And were you born on September 19, 1979 at 2:47 p.m. and a Virgo?"

"Yes to both."

Seventeen looked at Croaker, who nodded. Then, the two men reached towards the covered object on the table together, with each of them grabbing a corner of the cloth before yanking it away. Underneath was a solid cube completely covered in a chrome-like metal with an obvious button on the top.

"Have you ever seen this object before, Miss Granger?"

She studied the familiar object and then looked up at the Unspeakables. "Yes," she said calmly. "It's called the Cryptohedron, and it contains the magical artifact you Unspeakables refer to as the Time-Turner."

The two men stared at her in shocked silence.

"Bloody hell," Seventeen whispered. "It actually *happened*!"

The poor man looked so excited that Hermione feared he might be on the verge of wetting himself. Croaker was calmer, though his discomfort at realizing he was standing in the presence of an actual time traveler and, perhaps more importantly, someone who had escaped from a doomed reality was palpable.

"Thank you, Miss Granger," he said tersely after clearing his throat. "Please activate the Cryptohedron and replace the Time-Turner now. I assume you know how."

By way of an answer, the witch reached over and pressed the button in the middle of the cube. In response, the Cryptohedron went through its standard activation process before opening and shooting a bright light up at the ceiling. Hermione reached her hand into the light, and the Time-

Turner appeared in her grasp. She withdrew her hand, and the oddly twisted device simply floated in mid-air.

Hermione and the Unspeakables stared at the Time-Turner in fascination. However, after a few seconds, fascination turned into consternation for Croaker and Seventeen.

"I was given to understand, Seventeen, that at this point, the Time-Turner should float back down into the Cryptohedron, which would then close and we'd be done with all this!"

"I-it should, Croaker! I don't understand!"

Hermione sighed loudly. "I'm sorry, gentlemen. I was afraid something like this might happen."

Then, without another word, she turned and headed for the door, casually disabling three high-level locking Charms along the way. She opened the door before the Unspeakables could interfere and then beckoned someone to enter.

"Hello!" the boy said cheerfully as he accompanied his friend back to the table. "I'm Harry Potter. Well, for the moment at least. You must be Mr. Croaker and Mr. Seventeen. Hermione's told me all about you. Or what little she knows anyway."

"Harry!" Hermione snapped. "Stop chin-wagging and do as I told you!"

"Oh, right!" Harry reached forward and put his own hand into the light stream just below where the Time-Turner still floated. To the shock of the Unspeakables, a *second* Time-Turner appeared, and then, both objects somehow merged into a single Time-Turner which gently floated back down

into the bowels of the Cryptohedron. The Cryptohedron closed itself and went dormant once more. Seventeen was gobsmacked and looked rather like a Muggle child who'd just found out that Santa Claus was real *and* was friends with the Easter Bunny. Croaker was less entertained.

"What the *bloody hell* just happened?!" he shouted in consternation.

"Well," Hermione began. "Originally, you revealed the Cryptohedron to me in an earlier timeline and asked me to use it to prevent a sequence of events that had led to the takeover of the Ministry of Magic by Death Eaters and would soon lead to a global disaster involving You-Know-Who, Dementors or both. Luckily, I got that taken care of rather easily. *However*, just a few days ago from my perspective, a different sequence of events unrelated to the prior timeline – well, except for the fact that Harry here was no longer a soulless husk – seemed likely to lead to an imminent yet unrelated global disaster involving intelligent werewolves."

"... intelligent werewolves?!" Croaker sputtered in confusion.

"Yes sir," Harry said while picking up the story. "If you've been following the news, you probably know that Peter Pettigrew was a Death Eater who framed Sirius Black for his crimes. Yesterday in the timeline before this one ...."

He turned to Hermione in confusion. "Is that the right way to say it? The timeline before this one?"

The girl nodded, and Harry turned back to the astonished wizards.

"Right. So yesterday in the timeline before this one, Peter Pettigrew got hold of Damocles Belby's Wolfsbane Potion which he was going to replicate and then provide to Fenrir Greyback's pack."

Croaker began to sputter loudly at the mention of Belby's potion.

"Harry advised me of these developments after they'd already happened," Hermione continued. "I idly wondered whether it would be possible to use the Time-Turner again to go back and prevent those events from occurring. I quickly realized that I would not be able to travel back a second time but that I could send Harry back instead, at which point I realized that the Time-Turner itself had given me tacit approval to do just that."

"What?!" Seventeen exclaimed.

"And so," Harry said, "right about now for you but two days ago for me, Hermione summoned me here, explained what was going on, and allowed me to use the Time-Turner which sent me back in time just far enough to stop Pettigrew. Oh, and by the way, Remus Lupin is basically cured of his lycanthropy."

"Remus Lupin is here at Hogwarts?" Croaker asked weakly. "And ... *basically* cured of lycanthropy?!"

"Yes," said Harry. "He's been living at Hogwarts posing as the new Caretaker, Malachi Sturgeon ...."

"Hang on," Hermione interrupted. "Malachi Sturgeon is also this Remus Lupin person? And he's also *a werewolf*? You never told me that!"



"Sorry," Harry said bashfully. "I *did* tell you in the previous timeline, but it slipped my mind in this one."

Then, the boy blinked in sudden confusion. "Hang on! *Malachi Sturgeon is actually the werewolf Remus Lupin.*" Then, Harry grinned widely. "Ah! The Secret is no longer valid! Which means he's *not* a werewolf at all anymore!"

He turned to Croaker and Seventeen who were now even more confused. "Gentlemen, please allow me to amend my prior statement. Remus Lupin is now *completely* cured of lycanthropy! I should probably go and tell him right after this!"

"What? Someone got the Wolfsbane Potion to work?!" Croaker exclaimed.

"What is the Wolfsbane Potion?" asked Seventeen, who had never been cleared for knowledge of the long-defunct Project Romulus.

"*Never mind, Seventeen!*" Croaker hissed through gritted teeth.

"To answer your question," Harry added. "No, the Wolfsbane Potion did not cure Remus. Rather, he was cured through something related to Animagery, though he can probably explain it to you better than I can. I've never been interested in becoming an Animagus."

"Really?" Hermione asked in surprise. "Not ever?"

"Nope. With my luck, my Animagus form would be a guppy or something."

"Trust me, Harry. If you ever become an Animagus, you would *never* end up something as boring as a guppy!"

"*A-hem! If we could return to the matters at hand, please!*" Croaker barked loudly enough to make Seventeen jump slightly.

"Now, then," he continued in a huff. "If I understand you both correctly, Miss Granger, you and Mr. Potter met here in this room, and you allowed him to somehow acquire a *second* Time-Turner?!"

"Oh no," the girl responded. "From what Harry told me, the other me returned her Time-Turner to the Cryptohedron and then somehow reset it so that Harry could then open it and claim the Time-Turner for himself. Then, he went back in time, at which point there were two Time-Turners active at the same time although they were really just the same Time-Turner co-locating. I suppose it has something to do with the First Exception to the Fifth Exception to Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration that you both explained to me in the prior timeline. Or, I suppose, in both of the two prior timelines."

"... but ... *how*, Miss Granger?" Seventeen stammered out. "How did you just ... *reset* the Cryptohedron manually?!"

The witch shrugged. "I'm sure I've no idea, Mr. Seventeen. *I* wasn't the one who did it. It was a different me, and *I* don't have her knowledge of how to do it. Or perhaps, I no longer have *my* knowledge of how to do it, depending on how you want to look at it."

"It's like I said," Harry said to his friend. "Time-traveling pronouns are *tough*."

"Indeed," Hermione replied.

"Uh-huh," Croaker said while rubbing his face with his hands. "And where were Seventeen and I while you were resetting the Cryptohedron so that someone else could take a wholly unprecedented jaunt through time and history?"

Hermione paled slightly. "If it's all the same, Mr. Croaker, I'd rather not say. I mean, I'm sure the two of you are mature and sensible enough not to hold a grudge over something an alternate version of myself did to alternate version of yourselves in a timeline that no longer exists, but ...."

"RIGHT! NEVER MIND!" Croaker shouted. "We're done, Seventeen! The Time-Turner has been returned to its container, and we have enough information on the crisis – or *crises*, I suppose – that triggered its activation. We can go now, and I can go drink enough whiskey to make myself forget the Cryptohedron exists. And if Magic has any mercy for me, that damnable Chime won't sound again until after I'm long dead!"

"Does the Cryptohedron have a chime?" Harry asked Hermione out of curiosity.

"NEVER! MIND!" Croaker wiped his hands over his face once again before speaking in a quieter but still agitated voice. "Now, is there anything which either of you would wish to share that either of you think might be ... I don't know, *good for the Unspeakables to know?*"

Hermione reached into her robe and pulled out a scrap of paper. "Here, Mr. Seventeen. This is for you. You might find these useful areas of research."

Seventeen took the note and read it with a confused expression. "What is a ... *Klein bottle*? And a ... *hypercube*?"

"They're concepts from Muggle higher mathematics. I'm not really qualified to explain either of them to you, but if you have any scientifically-trained Muggleborns among the Unspeakables, they could probable arrange some kind of interview with some Muggle academics who are knowledgeable about 4th-dimensional mathematics."

Seventeen's face light up in excitement at the prospect of new avenues of research. Then, he looked down at the note again. "And who is this ... *Doctor Who* person? He sounds Chinese!"

"It's a Muggle TV series with a time-travel element. It's off the air at the moment, but if your research into it seems like it might bear fruit, I'm sure you could, oh, I don't know, *Confund* the head of the BBC into starting it back up again?"

The young Whovian did her best to look innocent while beside her Harry just rolled his eyes.

"Thank you, Miss Granger," said Seventeen very earnestly. "Thank you *so* much for this! I can't wait to get back to work!"

"Yes, yes. I'm sure it will be exciting times in the Time Division for *years* to come, Seventeen. Anything else?"

Harry coughed. "Just one thing, Mr. Croaker." The boy reached into a pocket and pulled out the brass orb he used to record both Pettigrew's ranting monologue and his own father's confession as to using an Unforgiveable Curse.

"Hermione and I found this device in the Shrieking Shack. I was wondering if you could tell me what it's called?"

Croaker's eyes narrowed, as the boy's question implied that he knew *exactly* what it *was*, if not its name. He also resolved to find out what idiot had left a broken piece of highly classified magitech behind after Project Romulus shut down to be later found by precocious time-traveling children. But he would *not* play the boy's game of revealing exactly what the orb was. He would not ....

"I say!" Seventeen said in bemusement, "Is that an old Eye-Spy?! I haven't seen that model in *years*!"

"*I knew it!*" Hermione growled angrily through gritted teeth upon learning the predictably awful pun the wizards had devised for a flying camera. Croaker's teeth were grinding together for a different reason.

"Seventeen," he growled. "How in Merlin's name did you *ever* get a job at the Department involving *handling classified materials*!"

The other Unspeakable shrugged amiably. "Well, honestly, it's not usually an issue. My job generally only lets me deal with other Unspeakables instead of normal non-weird human beings."

"So!" Harry interrupted. "This Eye-Spy thingy. Has the Department of Mysteries ever given any thought to its ... commercial possibilities?"

Croaker studied the boy for a few seconds. "Oh yes, I'd forgotten. You're the infamous *Slytherin* Potter."

Harry shrugged and waited for an answer to his question. After a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, Croaker gave in.

"We have, of course, investigated the commercialization of nearly every bit of magical technology that we've ever invented, discovered, or otherwise replicated. Usually, when the Department decides to allow some innovation of ours to enter the marketplace, we do so through licensing arrangements with private wizards and witches who have independently produced such magitech or are close to doing so. That way, our involvement in the private sector is both concealed and minimized."

Both Harry and Hermione instantly filed the word "*magitech*" away for future investigation.

"In the case of the Eye-Spy, the Department's Committee on Magical Ethics vetoed commercialization. The concern was that if Eye-Spies came into widespread use and were combined with invisibility Charms, it would represent an unacceptable invasion of wizarding privacy. We already grapple with the decision of the British government to put a camera on every street corner in London, a tremendous threat to the Statute of Secrecy. The Ethics Committee had no desire to see wizards repeat the mistakes of Muggles in that manner."

"The *Ethics* Committee said no?" Harry asked nonplussed. "You actually *have* an Ethics Committee?! You lot ran secret experiments for years on a werewolf child!"

"Experiments with the goal of helping that child overcome the debilitating curse which plagued him," Croaker said testily. "I know that the Department of Mysteries has an appalling reputation among conspiracy theorists who assume we regularly perform monstrous evils in furtherance of our duties. But the truth is that the DOM has been guided by strict ethical guidelines since its creation, guidelines meant to ensure ...."

Bored with the man's moralizing, Harry touched the orb with his wand and said: "Replay at 6:43:12." Once more, the sound of Peter Pettigrew's snide voice emanated from the orb.

*"And who do you think would help a wanted war criminal like Gustav Kleinwuchs emigrate to Britain and set him and his son up with fake identities? The Unspeakables, of course. They were willing to overlook his ... indiscretions in exchange for all of his research notes from his work during the War."*

Harry touched the orb again to stop the recording and then gazed coolly into Croaker's eyes.

"I'm curious, Mr. Croaker. When the Unspeakables decided to teach Peter Pettigrew how to become an Animagus, did you all *know* he was the grandson of Gustav Kleinwuchs, the Butcher of Silesia, who your so-very-ethical organization helped to escape justice and set up shop in Britain under a fake name in exchange for the research he obtained from experiments run in death camps?"

Upon hearing that secret revealed, Seventeen looked properly and genuinely appalled, as he was much younger than Saul Croaker and had never have learned of such a dark departmental secret. He grew even more horrified when he saw from Croaker's expression that the boy was telling the truth.

Croaker sighed. "Oh yes. Definitely a Slytherin. Can I assume that you've made arrangements to see this information disseminated if something happens that causes you to lose your recent memories?"

"You may assume, sir, that *all kinds* of information will be disseminated if anything happens to my memories or to any

other part of me, including my friends. You may also assume that I'm aware of that potion your Department uses to block Obliviations from being detected by Remembralls and that I've prepared countermeasures."

The Unspeakable snorted. "Of course." With a flick of his wand, he summoned a box and then levitated the Cryptohedron into it.

"I will bring this matter to the attention of my superiors. We will likely not permit you to market an Eye-Spy with the functionality of the ones we use in our work. And in any case, I imagine those would be far too expensive for your commercial ambitions anyway. But I'm sure we can come to some sort of ... mutual beneficial arrangement. I will owl you with the particulars in a week or so. You understand, of course, that with the capture of Pettigrew, the recovery of Augustus Rookwood, and this new information about Remus Lupin, our plate will be quite full until then."

"Naturally," said Harry easily. "I look forward to your owl. And to, as you said, a mutually beneficial arrangement."

"I'm sure you do." Croaker gave a curt but respectful nod to the two students and then made his way towards the door with the Cryptohedron tucked under his arm. An agitated Seventeen followed behind.

"Did we really give amnesty to *Gustav Kleinwuchs*?!" the younger man sputtered.

"*Not. Now. Seventeen!*" Croaker spat as the door closed behind them.

Hermione looked to her friend in astonishment.



"I honestly cannot believe you just blackmailed the Unspeakables with information about their collaboration with magical Nazis just to secure the rights to produce magical video cameras."

Harry laughed. "I'm pretty sure we just blackmailed the Unspeakables, Hermione. You were standing right beside me looking impassive the whole time. They'll never believe you're not in on it."

"Thank you, Harry," she replied archly. "I feel so much better knowing I'm officially your accomplice after the fact."

## Chapter End Notes

Next: Moving on, we check in on Jim and Ron, SPAM, Blaise, and our first real look inside the Department of Mysteries. Plus an invitation is issued.

AN1: Harry's dream sequence is a slightly stripped-down version of the mock chapter I posted for my Discord followers on April 1st. Everyone liked it so much I decided to incorporate it into the official update. The fact that it is being posted on 4/20 is entirely coincidental.

AN2: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P\*\*\*\*\*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN3 (What the Sinister Man is reading): Nothing new, I'm afraid, though "Who Dares Win" by Oleg Gunnarson

has updated.

AN4: Special thanks to my Discord editors:

Aza, Darkphoenix31, Fionan, Flareix\_, HeidiWolf, JenniferWeasley, LFGB, Mr. Gift, nh1, Pivosh, and ProfessionalDragonslayer.

AN5: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 13,496. Followers: 14,432. Favorites: 12,598. Communities: 215. Go Team POS!

# Moving Forward

## Chapter Notes

### SHAMELESS PLUG!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### ***Harry Potter and the Death Eater Menace***

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***Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.***

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### ***Chapter 47: Moving Forward***

#### ***Gryffindor Tower 10:00 a.m.***

"Hey, Jim? Can, uh, you please do something about your snake? He's after Trevor. *Again!* ... *Hey, Jim?!"*

Neville stood a few feet away from his bed and watched anxiously as, for the third time that week, Jim Potter's pet snake Steve draped itself across the glass terrarium of Trevor the Toad. Inside the container, the toad sat very still and croaked nervously. Despite Neville's call, Jim did not respond from his nearby bed (from which the Boy-Who-Lived had not stirred all morning). As the worried toad-owner started to call out for help once more, Ron returned to the dorm room after a leisurely breakfast. He took in the scene (including the fact that Jim was *still* in bed) and sighed in mild exasperation.

"It's okay, Neville," he said. "I'll get him." Then, he walked past Neville to gingerly lift Steve up and transport him away from Trevor's habitat and back to his own.

"Thanks," Neville said with mild irritation. "But when Jim wakes up, tell him to talk to his snake, okay? You know, before I have to get a prefect involved?"

"Will do."

A few seconds later, an annoyed Neville followed Seamus and Dean out of the room. Ron looked around to make sure they were gone before lifting Steve back up and addressing it.

*"Hey, Jim hasss already told you, but I'll sssay it too. Ssstay away from the toad! It'sss poissonsss. Plusss it would get Jim into trouble if you hurt it, and Jim might have to sssend you away for good!"*

*"Duuude!"* exclaimed the California kingsnake with an indignant hiss that nevertheless somehow sounded like an American surfer's accent to Ron's ears. *"Like I would be ssstupid enough to lick that ssslimy thing. I can sssmell*

*itsss toxinsss from here. Grosss. But itsss cassse sssits right in the sssunlight, and it feelsss sso nice!"*

Ron rolled his eyes and cast a Warming Charm on the base of Steve's terrarium before lowering the serpent back into it.

*"Isss that better?"*

*"Muchasss graciasss, Big Red! But sssince you're here and the other two-legsss are all gone, you ssshould talk to Jimbo. He'sss got the bluesss real bad!"*

*"Yesss, I thought sso."*

"I'm right here, you know ... *Big Red*," Jim muttered from underneath the blankets pulled up over his head.

"I know," Ron said. "I also know you were pretending to be asleep because you didn't want to talk to anyone. And that you skipped dinner last night and breakfast this morning for the same reason. But I'm not just anyone, so come up for air and tell me what's bothering you."

The Boy-Who-Lived threw back his covers and pulled open his curtains. "What's bothering me? Seriously? How about the fact that it's an ironclad law of the universe that everyone I put all my faith in eventually turns on me!"

Ron winced. "Well, in my defense, I kinda had a pretty good excuse last year...."

"Not you!"

Ron closed the lid on Steve's terrarium before turning back to his friend.

"I know you're upset about your godfather, Jim. And you deserve to be. He took advantage of your trust and the trust of your whole family. I reckon I'd feel the same if Percy or one of my other brothers turned against my family. But hiding in bed isn't going to make you feel any better or change what Pettigrew did."

Jim huffed loudly before pulling himself up to sit on the bed facing his best friend. "It's ... not just Pettigrew ... Harry's leaving the family."

Ron was confused. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that in exchange for a *huge bribe* from my father, Harry is going to quit House Potter and change his name. I'll become the Potter Heir ... and the only Potter son. I'm about to lose the twin brother I only just got back. And I don't even know how I really feel about it because of this *damned* Imperius!"

He ran his fingers through his unruly hair in frustration.

"And then ... there's my Mum," he added.

"What about her?" Ron asked.

Jim looked embarrassed for a moment. "While Uncle Pete was holding us hostage, he ... he tried to make Mum choose between me and Harry. One would be safe, and the other would get turned into a werewolf!"

"Bloody hell!" Ron said, horrified.

The boy nodded. "Yeah. But ... here's the thing. Harry managed to take down Uncle Pete *before* she could make her choice. Only ... I don't know which of us she'd have picked!"

Ron sat down on the bed next to Jim. "Jim, your Mum *loves* you. You know that. She's always picked you in the past."

Jim snorted. "Yeah, but her *reasons* for picking me haven't always been straightforward. She sent Harry off to be raised by the Dursleys because she was afraid for him to be around me. Like just being close to me might get him killed. She made me hide being a Parselmouth for fear of how the public would react, not to mention Dad. And all last year and this year, she made a point of having those lunches with Harry to try and get to know him better. She's never done anything like that with me. Sometimes, I wonder if she really knows anything about the real me at all. I know it's ridiculous to feel jealous of Harry given how we were both brought up. But, I also know that deep down, Mum feels guilty over what he went through at the Dursleys. And ... I really *don't* know who she'd choose if it came down to the two of us."

"Come on, Jim. There's no way you can seriously think your mum would pick Harry over you even if she did have to make that choice!"

"Why not?" Jim said suddenly angry. "*James* sure was happy to choose Harry over me after I got outed as a Parselmouth last year!"

"I thought you got over that," Ron asked in surprise, both over the sentiment and over Jim saying his father's name with such disdain.

Jim looked down at the floor. "We didn't get over it so much as ... silently agree to never speak of it. He sure hasn't ever apologized for how he treated me last year." His expression darkened. "But I guess he's made his choice now. By the

end of tomorrow, I'll be an only child. And Harry will probably never have anything to do with me again."

Then, he laughed bitterly. "And I can't decide if I feel sad about losing my brother or happy because I'm *cursed* to mistrust him!"

"Jim ...."

"Uncle Pete betrayed me nearly every day of my life. My father still freaks out every time he gets a reminder I can talk to snakes. Harry's leaving. And for all I know, my mother might want to go with him."

He looked away, suddenly overcome with emotion. "I ... I j-just feel like I keep losing *everyone*!" he said with a sob.

"Hey, remember!" Ron suddenly said. "You've *always* got Steve!"

"*Ki-ki-ki!*" the snake laughed in response.

Jim whirled around at his friend's seemingly blithe response. Then, he saw Ron's smirk and the twinkle in his eyes, and he laughed despite his uncertainties.

"You prat!" he said while wiping a tear away.

Ron put his arm around Jim's shoulders and squeezed. "And me, of course. Me and Steve. You're stuck with us both, so there's that at least."

Jim laughed. "Yeah, I guess there's always that."

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***Later in Hogsmeade***



After completing their business with the Unspeakables, Harry and Hermione made their way out of the castle for the unscheduled Hogsmeade weekend. They quickly met up with several friends from SPAM including Theo No-Name, who was bemused to find himself flanked by Anthony Goldstein, Sue Li, Susan Bones, Fred Weasley, and even Bobby Lattimer and Penelope Clearwater (the Head Boy and Girl). Despite his insistence to Hermione all those months before that he didn't need a "bodyguard" to visit Hogsmeade, it seemed he'd attracted a formidable security detail anyway. And indeed, whenever any of their Pureblooded schoolmates seemed to glare at the Outcast, they were met by equally intimidating glares from the SPAM members that warded them off. Harry and Hermione joined the group as it made its way around the town.

Today's Hogsmeade Visit was an especially enjoyable one. In celebration of the end of the Azkaban Crisis and Minister Fudge's big speech, the town had pulled out all the stops. Balloons and pro-Ministry banners were everywhere, and live musicians on enchanted instruments played merrily on a stage that had been assembled at the end of the street. Indeed, signs announcing the musical line-up were posted everywhere, and all the students were excited that the Weird Sisters would be giving a free concert that afternoon at four o'clock.

High overhead, the Demonstration Flyer teams for all the major broom companies engaged in amazing aerial acrobatics while shooting off colorful fireworks from their wands. And speaking of broom companies, there was a new addition to the front window of Quality Quidditch Supplies: a life-sized picture of Harry Potter holding a Chaser's Edition Firebolt! Next to it was a magical painting that reproduced Harry's daring rescue of Amy Wilkes on the back of one of the company's products and showed how

easily even a boy could evade *attacking werewolves while flying in the wrong gear!* Harry blushed at the ribbing he took from his friends over the display, although his embarrassment was assuaged by the thought of how much he got *paid* by Firebolt for the privilege of using his image.

Soon, the group made their way to the Three Broomsticks, where Justin Finch-Fletchley had rented an entire room for the SPAM membership. He also paid for a sumptuous buffet for the whole club complete with a delicious-looking cake decorated to say "Go Team SPAM!" The cake also featured animated decorations made of enchanted icing that depicted a cartoonish lion, badger, eagle, and snake cavorting together happily around what appeared to be an actual can of the infamous Muggle meat product. Justin assured everyone that this cake was not cursed in any way, and he'd ordered it for the occasion from some new catering firm called *Molly's Magical Morsels*. At that announcement, Harry glanced over towards Fred and Ron, both of whom smirked proudly at this recognition of their mother's success.

While everyone enjoyed the splendid meal and gratefully thanked Justin for his generosity, the Muggleborn himself seemed somewhat wistful. Harry noticed and asked him if everything was okay. Justin thanked him for his concern, but rather than answering him directly, the boy stood and tapped his silverware against a glass to get the group's attention.

"Everyone," he began, "I want to thank you all for coming. This is just my way of saying what you've all meant to me this year. When I came to Hogwarts as an ignorant Muggleborn who barely knew which end of a wand to hold, I wondered if I'd ever truly fit in. Not just in Hufflepuff or even at Hogwarts, but as a wizard in general. The culture

was just ... so different than what I'd been used to. It was daunting, especially because, in the Muggle world, my family ... well, to be honest, my family is wealthy. But more than that, it's very influential, but only in ways that turned out to mean nothing at all in this world.

"Had I not been a wizard, I would have gone to Eton and then to Oxbridge instead of Hogwarts. Those names probably mean nothing to those of you raised in the magical world, but if I'd gone that route, I might well have become the sort of person who looks down on less fortunate Muggles the same way so many Purebloods look down on us. At Hogwarts, I learned magic. But for the first time in my life, I *also* learned what it was like to be an outsider, to be someone looked down upon as lesser, to be part of a disliked if not despised minority. And whatever happens for the rest of my life, I will always be ... *grateful* for that experience. Grateful because facing the bigotry of others against me also meant accepting the support of all you wonderful people. Grateful for being made to realize that friends and allies can come from anywhere if you're willing to accept them. Grateful...."

The boy's voice broke, and he coughed to clear his throat. "Grateful for the chance to grow through adversity and become a better person than Eton and Oxbridge would have made me. I hope - desperately hope - that I can only continue to grow as a person. And that ..."

He paused, suddenly overcome. "And that I don't *change* in a way that will make any of you think less of me."

At that remark, a few of the SPAM members looked at one another in confusion. Harry leaned forward in his seat as Justin continued.

"Two weeks ago, I turned fourteen, the earliest age at which one can legally claim a seat on the Wizengamot. At tomorrow's emergency session, I will officially take my Vow of Unity and formally become Lord Conditional of the Noble House of Prince. Please keep that to yourselves until after tomorrow, as it's probably going to be a bit of a surprise to the Wizengamot. But it's something I've been working towards for a while, and it's an incredible opportunity for me and my family. Unfortunately, it's also something I've become rather afraid of. You see, when I take those vows ... I will also come under the effects of the Ultimate Sanction."

Justin looked straight at the Outcast. "Theo, I honestly don't know how I'll look at you when I see you again after the Easter Break. How I'll *think* about you. But ... if Lord Prince ever says or does anything to you that would shame the person I am today, then I want you to know how sorry I am. And that goes for every one of you."

With that, Justin sat down somewhat awkwardly. The room was silent for a moment, though Susan Bones did rise, come up behind Justin, and give him a hug. A few other girls sniffled a bit, and a pall fell over the group. Then, Theo himself stood, cleared his throat, took a deep breath ... and began to sing.

"SPAM, *spam*, spam, Spam! SPAM, *spam*, spam, Spam!"

Across the room, Justin suddenly laughed as the tension was broken. Whatever the future held for him, at this moment, he had these friends. And so, he loudly joined in.

"Lovely Spaaaaam! Wonderful Spaaam! Lovely Spaaaaam! Wonderful Spaaam!"

Within seconds, everyone in the club was singing along. Even Hermione.

"SPAM, *spam*, spam, Spam! SPAM, *spam*, spam, Spam!"  
"Lovely Spaaaaam! Wonderful Spaaam! Lovely Spaaaaam!  
Wonderful Spaaam!"

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### ***Later ...***

As Cornelius Fudge climbed the stage and strode to the podium, a wave of spontaneous applause punctuated by cheers and whistles arose from the audience. Despite his best efforts at humility, Fudge couldn't help but puff up at the praise. The public response to his handling of what the Prophet had been calling "The Death Eater Menace" since the previous August had been extraordinarily positive, and his favorability rating was the best it had ever been. Literally *ever*, since he'd only narrowly won a controversial election to take the Minister's Office, and his approval had been lukewarm at best since his term began. But even the cheers at his victory party had not been as loud as the noise the people of Hogsmeade were making for him now.

With characteristic polish, Fudge grinned easily and put his hands up to placate the crowd before casting a Sonorus on himself so that he could be heard. Down below the podium, wizards employed by the Wizarding Wireless were set up to record his words and broadcast them to the whole nation.

"Fellow wizards and witches, my friends all of you! Thank you so much for that wonderful welcome on this most special day. My remarks will be brief, as I am to be followed by those talented young musicians, *The Weird Sisters*. And I'm sure all those young people out there in the crowd would rather hear them than me!"

A wave of wry laughter spread through the crowd. If any of the young people he'd mentioned had any urge to voice

their agreement with the Minister's sentiment, they were wise enough not to give in to it, as most of the Hogwarts faculty was interspersed with the crowd, along with numerous Aurors and hit wizards.

"As you all are aware by now, the Azkaban Crisis is resolved, and the Death Eater Menace is over. Tomorrow, at a special session of the Wizengamot, I will formally relinquish my authority as Praetor Maximus and return to being just a plain old *ordinary* Minister for Magic. While I was honored by the faith the Wizengamot placed in me by appointing me to that role, I believe that once such a major crisis is over, it is the duty of any Minister worthy of the title to relinquish his emergency powers as quickly as possible. We are, after all, a democracy, not a tyranny such as what those very same Death Eaters desired for our nation."

The crowd cheered again for Fudge's humility and commitment to "democracy." Of course, many of those in the crowd (Harry Potter, to name but one) knew all too well just how perfunctory Britain's commitment to democracy was. Nearly all political power in Wizarding Britain was held either by the Wizengamot or the Ministry. The former was, for the most part, an inherited aristocracy. The latter, except for the elected Minister and the department heads who he appointed and who served at his pleasure, was mainly an unelected civil service riven with nepotism and corruption. The job of the Minister for Magic was to oversee the Ministry as much as could be done with such a massive bureaucracy and to liaise with the Wizengamot where their duties overlapped.

Every adult wizard and witch in Britain could cast a vote on Election Day (held every seven years) for any of the officially recognized candidates for Minister for Magic merely by holding their wands aloft and speaking their

preferred candidate's name at any point between sunrise and sunset. Whichever candidate got the most votes would serve a seven-year term absent death, incapacity, or a no-confidence vote by two-thirds of the Wizengamot. In any of those cases, the Wizengamot would then replace the fallen Minister with an interim Acting Minister for the remainder of the removed politician's term. *That* was Wizarding Britain's *sole* concession to the Muggle concept of "democracy."

"Of the five prisoners removed from Azkaban," Fudge continued, "I can report to you that Bellatrix Lestrange is dead ...!"

Another round of lusty cheering from the audience briefly drowned out Fudge's words, and he patiently waited to continue.

"Rabastan Lestrange, Rodolphus Lestrange, and Augustus Rookwood are in DMLE custody. Their final ... disposition will be decided tomorrow by the Wizengamot. But I can confirm that Fenrir Greyback and his vile packmates are already in Azkaban, where they will remain for the rest of their wretched lives."

More cheers.

"As for the final escaped prisoner, many of you have heard rumors about the status of Sirius Black, who was convicted in 1981 of serving You-Know-Who and of betraying the family of the Boy-Who-Lived. I can officially announce at this time that those rumors *are true*! The Ministry's investigation has revealed that Sirius Black, the presumptive Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of Black, was innocent of all the charges that led to his incarceration. His conviction was the result of an elaborate fraud

perpetrated against both Sirius Black and the people of Wizarding Britain by the Death Eaters who were truly responsible for those crimes, all of whom are dead or in DMLE custody."

Out among the crowd, Harry crooked an eyebrow at that last comment. One of those Death Eaters was Narcissa Black, who was *not* in DMLE custody as far as he knew. He made a mental note to check with Lucius Malfoy to find out his ex-wife's current status. He also noted with amusement the dour expression on the face of James Potter, who stood behind Fudge on the stage along with his Senior Staff.

"I can further announce that within the last hour, I have been contacted by Lord Black through a solicitor he has engaged. Black is currently in convalescence recovering from the aftereffects of his incarceration. If his health permits, I hope that he will be able to attend tomorrow's Wizengamot session and perhaps even take his Oath of Unity before fully assuming his position.

"But while Lord Black's wrongful incarceration was a horrific miscarriage of justice, I want to reassure everyone that I will not attempt to shove the blame for those events onto my predecessor, the late Millicent Bagnold. Minister Bagnold served ably and well during the War against You-Know-Who. Even if deeply regrettable mistakes were made during the haze of the war's conclusion, let us not judge too harshly a fine woman who is no longer here to speak for herself."

Fudge's moving comments led to another wave of applause from those in the audience moved by the man's generosity. Others, like Harry, applauded politely while noting just how *skillfully* Fudge had, in fact, shoved all the blame for



Sirius's incarceration on a predecessor who was indeed no longer around to speak for herself.

"Next," Fudge continued. "I would like to give special notice to the person most responsible for bringing this crisis to a close. An Auror from whom I expect great things in the future. But also, an Auror who I have known personally for years and consider a dear friend. Ladies and gentlemen, *SENIOR AUROR PIUS THICKNESSE!*"

This time, Fudge himself led the applause for Thicknesse who'd been standing on the stage the whole time next to James Potter and the other Senior Aurors. Somewhat bashfully, Thickness took two steps forward and then waved nervously to the audience, who treated the newly famous Auror like a rock star. Behind him, the other Aurors clapped with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Harry smirked at James's expression. It was amazing that he was descended from a man who seemed incapable of a poker face if the visible disdain he showed for Thicknesse meant anything.

Fudge returned to the podium.

"And finally, while I do not wish to cast any sort of pall over the joy of today's celebration, I would ask that we all recognize the valiant sacrifice of those who could not be here today. I speak, of course, of Geoffrey Fawcett, an Auror trainee who died heroically fighting against Death Eaters here in Hogsmeade last Halloween, as well as the five hit wizards who have been committed to the Janus Thickey Ward of St Mungos due to the curse damage they suffered in an attempt to apprehend an ally of the Death Eaters. Their names are Lester Abbot, Craig Bowker, Dermot McDougal, Tallulah Montcrief, and Melusine Pepper. Please keep them and their families in your thoughts."

With that, Fudge took off his distinctive green bowler and placed it over his heart before bowing his head.

"A moment of silence for these brave wizards and witches."

With that, every male present who was wearing a hat immediately doffed it. The crowd went completely silent save for audible sobbing coming from somewhere behind Harry. He took a quick glance behind him and noticed it was Hannah Abbot, a Hufflepuff he knew casually but had hardly spoken to since his Second Year (and not at all since the Pureblood girl had joined the CPS). Then, he winced internally as he remembered that *Lester* Abbot had been one of the hit wizards who Fudge had spoken of. While he did not regret saving several lives during his time jaunt, he couldn't help but feel a tiny measure of guilt for the five injured hit wizards, none of whom (as far as he knew) had suffered any injuries in the prior timeline. Luckily, with Pettigrew and his werewolf allies in jail, no one else would suffer from his decision to time-travel.

After a suitable length of time, Fudge raised his head.

"Thank you all, not just for coming today but for the support you've shown to me and to our Ministry. And now, without further ado, I turn the stage over to *The Weird Sisters!*"

The crowd roared a final time as Fudge waved proudly and then exited the stage. From the other end, the Weird Sisters entered the stage to start setting up for their impromptu concert. Despite the name, all eight members of Wizarding Britain's premier rock band were male, and their attire consisted of lots of artfully torn leather with the occasional raven-feather accent. Harry knew little about popular music either among wizards or Muggles, though he knew Sue Li openly despised the popular band, which she haughtily described as "*commercialized punk rock meant*

*for consumption by upper-class wizard posers and their tasteless spawn.*" Suddenly, he was distracted from musical criticism when someone called his name.

"Heir Potter!"

The boy looked around to see who was calling *Heir Potter* that on the last day it would be his surname and title. To his surprise, it was the Minister strolling up to him.

"Oh, hello, Minister Fudge," the boy said amiably. "I enjoyed your speech."

"Thank you very much for the compliment, m'boy." With that, Fudge discreetly pulled out his wand and cast a rather sophisticated privacy spell around them. "Heir Potter, er, *Harry* ... I wanted to let you know how impressed I was with the way you and the Flint boy captured Peter Pettigrew yesterday. Jolly good show, that!"

"Thank you, Minister," Harry said cautiously. "I, um, noticed that you didn't mention Pettigrew's name during your speech."

The politician looked somewhat abashed. "Yes, I decided that it would be best to downplay that aspect of things until the Aurors finish their interrogation of Pettigrew so that he can be formally tried. Your heroism certainly deserves recognition, but I thought it would be better for your family's reputation if I didn't broadcast ...."

"The fact that my father had a Death Eater serving as his Seneschal all these years?"

Fudge paused to clear his throat. "Yes ... quite. I know the whole thing will come out soon, but I thought it unwise to release the information as the Azkaban Crisis is getting

wrapped up. Best to handle that aspect of things more discreetly. I'm sure you understand."

"Oh, of course, sir. My family is very grateful for your discretion. Although ...." Harry trailed off uncertainly.

"Yes, Harry?"

"Well, it's just unfortunate that Marcus Flint, who risked his life to help save my family, can't get the recognition he deserves. Based on the way he acted yesterday, I bet he'd make an awesome Auror if only he can get into the Academy."

Fudge smiled and looked around. "Is young Flint here?"

"No, I'm afraid. He'd planned to go away for the Easter Break with his girlfriend. Our little Potter Family Adventure delayed him, but he left this morning."

"Oh well, no matter," the Minister continued. "Have the boy make an appointment with my office once he gets back. I'll treat him to lunch and then see that he gets an introduction to the head of the Auror Application Review Board."

Harry grinned. "Thank you, sir! I'll let him know!"

Fudge returned the smile and then clapped the boy reassuringly on the shoulder even as he shooed away an insect that had been buzzing around his head with the other hand. Then, the Minister made his goodbyes and wandered off to glad-hand some more of the townsfolk.

"*Okay, Marcus,*" Harry thought to himself. "*If that doesn't get you into the Auror Academy, I don't know what will.*"

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***The Department of Mysteries***  
***The Oversight Committee***  
***4:00 p.m.***

"And so, that completes my preliminary report. Any questions?"

A stunned silence fell over the weekly Friday afternoon meeting of the Department of Mysteries Oversight Committee.

"Any questions?!" barked one particularly livid Unspeakable (who was probably but not necessarily a witch). "Seriously?! You drop a bomb like that on us and ask if we have any bloody questions!"

"Calm down, Love," said Control. "Nothing is improved by shouting."

The exact number of wizards and witches in the conference room was *uncertain*, for it was the nature of life as an Unspeakable that even the individual members of the Oversight Committee could not know definitively *who else* sat on Oversight alongside them nor even *how many* people were at the meeting. For some of the less perceptive members, even the *gender* of their peers was a mystery.

It was *possible* to know that the Chief Director of the DOM, aka Control, chaired these interdepartmental meetings and that Number Seven, aka Saul Croaker, aka the "Voice of the Unspeakables," was also present. It was also *possible* to know that the Directors of the ten *known* divisions were present, though they could be identified only by their areas of interest: Death, Love, Time, Space, Mind, Prophecy, Records, Creatures, Muggles, and Ethics. Of those (perhaps ironically so given her field of expertise), *Love* was

particularly known for her ill temper. Or possibly *his* ill temper.

However, it was *not possible* to know who else was in attendance or what divisions, if any, they represented. Most of those present who thought about the matter, however, felt *quite certain* that there were more than twelve people participating in the meeting. How many more? And who were they? Only Control knew for sure, and he (or she?) wasn't telling.

"That said," continued Control, "your report is astonishing, Time. Are you seriously telling us that it is possible for the Time-Turner to be reprogrammed to accept users other than the Designated User selected by the Cryptohedron?"

"It would seem so, although such a reprogramming can only be performed by the Designated User and only at the moment the Cryptohedron opens up to receive the Time-Turner at the conclusion of its first journey. In this case, Miss Granger herself has no personal memories of how it was achieved, as her actions to do so were erased from history once Harry Potter engaged the device for its second journey."

"Was this confirmed through Legilimency?" inquired Love.

"No," answered Voice. "Only a light surface scan was feasible at the time. And both Granger and Potter possess strong Occlumency shields that are at least good enough to repel casual scans."

"What?" Love exclaimed. "They're children!"

"Granger is 14, and Potter will turn 14 in a few months," said Time. "In any case, there is anecdotal evidence from prior activations that the Designated User will always be an

Occlumens or the equivalent, although it is usually impossible to know whether a particular User already had that skill before the journey or acquired it over the course of the journey. We only meet them at the end, after all. Regardless, there has never been a recorded incident of an Unspeakable successfully reading the mind of a Designated User at the conclusion of their journey."

"In the case of these two," Records spoke up while consulting a file in front of him (or her), "the Granger girl spent last summer at the Zabini compound in Florence, and there are reports that she studied under Giuseppe Lucardi of the Order of St Simon Magus during her stay. Potter, of course, has been a protégé of Severus Snape since he was a First Year, and he began formal instruction under Mr. X the following summer. It would not surprise me that they were both competent Occlumens even in the prior timeline despite their youth."

Croaker spoke up then. "I would add, based on my own observations, that Harry Potter likely has some degree of Legilimency as well."

"This is all quite fascinating," Ethics interrupted.  
"*Dangerously so*, in my opinion. I am uncomfortable with any inquiry by us or our successors into the possibility of manipulating the Cryptohedron's choice of Designated User. Likewise, our protocols regarding official inquiry into Designated Users in an open forum is clear. Accordingly, I hereby elect to take this entire matter under the advisement of the Ethics Committee."

"*ETHICS!*" sputtered Time angrily.

"*Furthermore*," continued Ethics with a glare towards Time, the youngest and most impetuous of the Directors. "Should

the Ethics Committee agree with my concerns, I will direct that all information about Harry Potter's use of the Time-Turner be classified as U7."

"Noted," said Control even as Time looked as though someone were proposing to euthanize his new puppy. "And for what it's worth, Ethics, I share your concerns."

U7 was the highest possible level of classification within the Department of Mysteries. Among other side effects, a U7 classification would require most of the Directors to Obliviate *themselves* of all information regarding Harry Potter's unauthorized trip through time. Only the DOM's longstanding identification of Time-Turner Users as "Agents of Fate" and the deference that resulted from such classification prevented the Unspeakables from trying to Obliviate both Potter and Granger of their own personal memories of using the Time-Turner.

"Before we consider locking away all our knowledge of this incident," Voice said with some resignation, "there is one other Potter-related matter to discuss."

With that, Saul Croaker related the information that Harry Potter had somehow acquired an Eye-Spy, that he had used it to record a statement by Peter Pettigrew implicating the Unspeakables in the expatriation of Gustav Kleinwuchs, and that in exchange for burying it, he wanted to commercialize the Eye-Spy for his own financial benefit.

"Of all the confounded impudence!" exclaimed Creatures, but Control quickly interrupted.

"Ethics, get together with Voice on this. Then, give me a write-up on how we can modify an Eye-Spy for commercial sale while still addressing the Ethics Committee's concerns about releasing them to the public."



"You're actually giving in to his blackmail?" asked Love, who seemed strangely amused by the idea.

Control nodded. "I am indeed, Love. Because Harry Potter is the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived; the son of *both* the Chief Auror *and* a witch we tried unsuccessfully to recruit when she was a student; a future Lord of the Wizengamot; a 13-year-old Occlumens; *probably* a 13-year-old Legilimens, *and* someone with the skill and resourcefulness to overcome Fenrir Greyback in an aerial duel. He was on the cusp of becoming a Person of Interest *before* he traveled through time. And now that he's an Agent of Fate as well? Yes, Love, I am happy to give in to Potter's blackmail if it gives us an inside track with him."

Control turned to Croaker. "Let the boy stew for a week or so, and then send him a proposal approved by Ethics. Start off with a 50-50 profit sharing arrangement and then let him work you down to 20% in exchange for stringent secrecy oaths for himself and Granger regarding both Kleinwuchs, Belby, the Wolfsbane Potion, and any functions of Eye-Spies that Ethics still wants classified. While you're at it, use the negotiations as a pretext to get a spy close to him. And long term, possibly a handler."

Croaker nodded as Control turned back to Time. "Anything else about this morning's incident that requires priority review?" The young Unspeakable shook his head in the negative. "Good. Then get us a full report by Monday, and we'll review it more thoroughly at next Friday's meeting."

"*Sure thing,*" Time grumbled under his breath. "*I'm already missing the Weird Sisters. What's the rest of my weekend good for?*"

"Moving on," said Control. "The next item on the agenda is the matter of the recovered Azkaban escapees and, in particular, our old friend, Augustus Rookwood. Mind?"

The Director of the Mind Division had just downed a third headache remedy for the day when called upon. The Unspeakable swallowed it quickly and began the report.

"Pursuant to the action plan I submitted this morning, I had all three of the prisoners brought to a secure holding area here in the Department, gave them the antidote to Draught of Living Death, and subjected each of them in turn to a level 7 Legilimency deep-scan, at the conclusion of which, they were returned to their DMLE cells without incident. I then submitted to level 5 scans by two different senior members of the Division of Mind to confirm that I had not been in any way compromised in my efforts, as required by standard divisional procedures. The results of my psychic interrogations are as follows:

"First, the Tabula Rasa was completely effective on the Lestrangle Brothers. Their Occlumency shields before being cursed were evidently weak and are now non-existent. Beyond being able to speak English and to perform all basic life functions - eat, use the toilet, dress themselves - they have no memories or knowledge of their prior lives. Nor can they acquire any new memories in the future unless additional magic is performed on them remove the curse. If the Department recommends it, we can gain access to the Tabula Rasa Counterspell from our counterparts in Australia, but all their memories of their former lives are gone forever."

Mind hesitated.

"Rookwood's situation ... is more complicated."

"Pfft!" scoffed Muggles. "What else is new?"

"Not to a concerning degree, Muggles," Mind continued. "Just ... an exhausting one. Erring on the side of caution, I spent six long and arduous hours studying that man's mind with the utmost caution so that I could be certain of my findings without any undue risk of psychic countermeasures. All my scans indicate that Rookwood did suffer Death of Personality just like the Lestranges. But his captors, either as part of an additional security measure or just plain cruelty, also subjected him to psychological torture. Specifically, he was forced to listen to a particularly annoying Muggle song on an endless repeat."

"You count that as torture?" complained Space. "Against him?"

"I do indeed," answered Mind. "Because by my conservative estimate, he listened to the same wretched song, 24/7, in excess of *350,000 times* since last August. I only had to experience it for a few hours, and that was *enough*. Furthermore, we have no way of knowing how many of those repetitions came before or after the Tabula Rasa was used to shatter his defenses. But coming on the heels of fourteen years of Dementor exposure which no doubt left him with compromised Occlumency, his internal psychic architecture has collapsed completely into devastated shambles."

"What was the song?" Muggles asked out of curiosity.

"*Tiptoe Through the Tulips*," said Mind whose upper lip curled in disgust.

"Bloody hell," Muggles said with a belly laugh. "That would drive anyone mad, I reckon. And it could affect him even under Draught of Living Death?"

"Oh yes," Mind replied. "Rookwood's Legilimency was certainly strong enough to maintain subliminal awareness even in that state. He may not have been awake enough to be *conscious* of the song, but he was *aware* of it. For *eight months*."

"Is it possible he used a shell persona to shield himself from both the Dementors and the Tabula Rasa?" inquired Voice.

Mind laughed. "Rookwood didn't have a shell persona. He had *seven*! And all of them have disintegrated completely. There's nothing of Rookwood left. Just a fragmentary dissociated awareness that can do nothing but endure the same awful song repeated on an infinite loop. Even when conscious after waking from Living Death, he could only mindlessly and continually sing it aloud until finally I stunned him at the end of the assessment."

"Yes, yes. But isn't it *possible* that he might have an *eighth* persona?" Voice persisted.

"Oh, thank you, Voice," Mind said sarcastically. "I'd have never considered such a possibility if you hadn't mentioned it. Look, to hide himself from a level 7 scan, Rookwood wouldn't need another persona. He'd have needed *at least* four or five spare personae that were each 100% committed to *constantly thinking about absolutely nothing* to block anyone from detecting what was underneath. And since the universal consensus is that it's *arithmantically impossible* to ever have more than *seven* active mind streams, there's no way even Rookwood could create almost twice as many just so he could dedicate a few extras to *never thinking*."

"None of this is relevant," said Control to close off discussion. "We obviously can gain no useful information

from Rookwood. Tomorrow, the Wizengamot will decide his fate. The options include having him Kissed by a Dementor, returning him to Azkaban until he rots, or putting him in the St Mungo's long-term damage ward. And if they choose the third option, well, accidents happen, don't they?"

Control turned to make eye contact with Ethics.

"Unless the Ethics Committee has any objections?"

The other Unspeakable snorted. "I can assure you, Control, that the Ethics Committee will have no objection to *anything* this Department chooses to do about Augustus Rookwood."

Control nodded. "Anything else to add, Mind?"

"Not regarding Rookwood directly. However, I am informed that Peter Pettigrew has been resisting Veritaserum via Occlumency, and we also now know that he was a Death Eater who had a personal relationship of some kind with Rookwood. I'd like to take a stroll around inside his brain. Perhaps he has some useful intel about his mentor that we could never get from Rookwood himself. We can also get his perspective on Harry Potter, and add it to our files."

"A good idea. Voice, contact the DMLE and arrange it."

"*But* not until late tomorrow afternoon, please," Mind added.

"Why not tonight?" Time asked.

"Because, *Time*, I have spent six hours today exploring the wreckage of Rookwood's mindscape, and I'm bloody exhausted. And also, because the Wizengamot hearing is tomorrow. Some of us don't have the luxury of full time

work here in the DOM, you know. Unfortunately, we have to spend half our days actually *running the country*."

Most of the assembled Unspeakables laughed at that, but Time simply stared at Mind in astonishment.

"Are ... are you secretly *Minister Fudge*?!" he asked incredulously.

The rest of the group turned to stare at Time while trying to decide if he was joking or not.

"Merlin's balls, Time," Croaker finally spat out. "Seriously! How the HELL did you get a job in the Department of Mysteries?!"

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### ***The Prince's Lair*** **7:00 p.m.**

In response to a message from Harry, Blaise Zabini made his way discreetly to the entrance to the Prince's Lair, gave the password, and then stepped inside. And then, he *froze in shock*. It had been years since Harry first brought Zabini into this legendary room and introduced him to the Hydra Throne. But now, for the first time, Blaise witnessed Harry Potter *actually sitting on it*.

The other Slytherin - no, the *Prince* of Slytherin - grinned at Blaise as he stood paralyzed. Theo sat at Harry's right hand and seemed just as amused by Blaise's shock.

"Welcome to the Prince's Lair!" Harry exclaimed cheerfully. "And no, this is not an early April Fool's joke."

He paused to give a mock-glare to Theo. "*That* came this morning," he added as some sort of inside joke that only the

grinning Outcast seemed to get.

"Anyway," Harry continued, "come have a seat. We have a *lot* to talk about!"

"I've no doubt," Blaise said cautiously even as he tried desperately to reinforce his Occlumency protections. He was exceptionally good at keeping out mind-readers and usually pretty good at maintaining a mask. But for once, the boy was utterly flummoxed at finding himself in a situation where he honestly didn't know *how* he was supposed to act. Casually, he made his way across the room and took the seat to the left of the Throne.

"So ... care to share with me how this unexpected promotion came about?" Blaise asked. "A bit out of the blue, isn't it?"

"What can I say?" Harry answered easily. "I've been *very* busy for the last two days or so. But as for how it came about, I guess you could say it started with a Prophecy."

Blaise nodded carefully, his face a mask of interest-but-not-too-much-interest. Internally, alarm bells were ringing.

"What sort of Prophecy? Like the one involving your brother?"

"Yes, actually. It was even uttered by a Trelawney, an ancestor of the one we have teaching here. I've already told Theo, which is a good thing because after I told him, I was required to swear a very tight oath, so I can't tell you what the Prophecy says directly. Luckily, Theo can fill you in for me."

"Good thinking on your part," Blaise said before turning towards Theo expectantly. Internally, he was relieved to be able to avoid eye contact with Harry. Unfortunately, Harry had more to say.

"Actually," the Prince said with a laugh, "I just remembered something. Now that I think about it, I *did* tell you the first few lines on Wednesday morning."

"... oh?"

"Yeah, remember when I dragged you into my room while acting like a complete nutter for a few minutes? I said something about '*This is how our world will end. In a cold yet all-consuming flame.*' That's how the Prophecy starts."

"Uh-huh," Blaise said weakly. Despite all his years of Occlumency training, he suddenly found himself uncertain whether he could really deceive someone like Harry who was apparently a Legilimency prodigy. He was also suddenly and acutely aware of the bead of sweat that had appeared on his left temple.

"So *that's* what that was all about," he continued as casually as he could.

"Yeah," Harry said. Then, the boy blinked a few times, and to his chagrin, Blaise could practically *see* the gears shifting in his friend's head.

"Now that I think about it," Harry continued, "I barely saw you after that over the last two days. You never once even asked me what that whole exchange was about."

Blaise shrugged. "Like you said, it was a busy two days. I'll be leaving for France on Saturday. I guess my mind's focused on that."



He turned back to Theo. "So, this Prophecy ...?"

Oblivious to the mounting tension in the room, Theo No-Name opened his mouth to recite the Prophecy that Harry had taught him, but the Prince of Slytherin held up a hand to stop him. Then, Harry looked Blaise in the eye and *truly* studied him. He was no longer smiling.

"Harry?" Theo asked hesitantly after a few seconds.

"Sorry, I was just thinking of something else," he said very calmly. "You see, the oath I swore to safeguard the Prophecy and that I'm also blatantly working around so I can share it with my friends is a very powerful oath. It doesn't just punish me for revealing the Prophecy, it physically prevents me from doing so. Whenever I even think about the Prophecy, I can feel the oath's effects on my magic, waiting to bind me from saying too much out loud. I'm told it will even stop me from revealing it in the presence of a hidden eavesdropper. The only time I *don't* feel the oath binding me at all is when there is no one else present *who doesn't already know it!*"

Harry leaned forward and placed his folded hands on the table while fixing Blaise with a fierce gaze.

"So, Blaise Zabini. Can you explain to me why I don't feel the oath affecting me now, even though you're here and you shouldn't know anything about the Prophecy it protects beyond the two lines I've already told you?"

At that, Theo looked sharply towards Zabini, and his whole body tensed slightly as though he suddenly suspected it might be necessary to attack the other boy in defense of his Prince. Even more alarmingly, *all nine of the Hydra's heads* swiveled around in unison to gaze at him as well.

Blaise licked his lips. "No, Harry. I cannot explain it."

"Okay," Harry said, his voice now noticeably colder. "Here's another question I've been meaning to ask you for a while but never found the right time. What do you know about any connection between me and the Deathly Hallows?"

Blaise's eyes widened. He didn't respond at first but simply returned Harry's gaze with his own.

"No," he said.

"No?" Harry repeated. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, no. As in '*no, I will not answer your questions.*' At least, not today." Then, he slowly and cautiously rose from his chair as if to reassure Harry and Theo (and the snakes) that he was not a threat.

"My mother explained to me once that true conversation can only take place between equals. Between two people operating on a basis of mutual trust with neither having a reason to lie and neither having a reason to distrust the other. I will not answer your questions because for some of them, I *can't* answer your questions. And for others, I could answer but not in a way you would accept as the truth."

With that, the boy casually headed towards the exit, speaking languidly as he went.

"You are still planning to attend the European Junior Dueling Tournament in Paris this summer, yes?"

"Yes," Harry answered, confused at the change of topic.

"Okay then. I'm going to be inviting a group of our male friends to visit for a few days before the Tournament. Sort

of a guys' sleepover. You will be attending."

He looked back towards Theo. "You will also be invited, Theo, if we can work out all the Ultimate Sanction bullshit that might cause any unpleasantness."

"Thanks, I guess," said Theo with a perplexed expression.

"It didn't sound much like you were *inviting* me, Blaise," Harry said. "It sounded more like an order."

"Let's compromise and call it an invitation you would do well to accept," Blaise replied. "It'll be a great time for us all. I'll give you a tour of Marseilles. I'll introduce you to my favorite Muggle TV shows and movies. I'll even teach you how to surf."

He paused in front of the door and turned back to face Harry directly. "And sometime during your stay, my mother will read your destiny in the cards a second time. And if she likes what she sees, she will answer *all* of your questions."

Blaise smiled knowingly. "And *believe me*, Harry Potter. You have more questions that you need answers for than you could *possibly* realize!"

With that, Blaise Zabini turned and left the Prince's Lair, leaving two troubled and confused friends behind.

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### ***Severus Snape's Quarters*** ***8:00 p.m.***

After a long day, Severus Snape sat alone in his living quarters sipping a brandy. Although it was still early, he was quite ready for bed. He had an early morning ahead of him, and he'd stayed up far too late the night before with Lily

only to spend hours this morning talking with Remus Lupin before spending the afternoon in Hogsmeade. Like most of the professors, he'd been expected to keep an eye on the students as they meandered around the village and to make sure none of them embarrassed the school during the Minister's speech. Finally, he'd spent the last two hours talking with young Justin Finch-Fletchley and making final preparations for the next morning's formalities.

In fact, he and the young Hufflepuff had discreetly met several times over the last few months. While Snape usually found the thought of social interaction with students to be completely repellent, in this case, their *relationship* demanded it. After all, in less than 24 hours, he would legally be the boy's Magical Guardian and also the Regent for his Noble House.

Snape marveled at the thought. "*The Noble House of Prince, rising from the ashes of its last Lord's foolishness! Incredible!*"

And with the House of Prince, Snape himself would rise to new heights. How astonishing that a Muggleborn child would finally be able to do for Snape what the Dark Lord had promised but never delivered! Pursuant to the agreement that Lucius had negotiated between Snape and Finch-Fletchley's Muggle parents and grand-father, Snape would first be recognized before the Wizengamot as Justin's magical guardian. Then, once the boy officially *had* a magical guardian, he would be eligible under the Prince charter to claim the status of Heir Presumptive of House Prince and also the Wizengamot seat that came with it. The Finch-Fletchley family was *fantastically* wealthy even by wizarding standards, and the funds to pay the Wizengamot dues were already waiting in a Gringotts escrow account to be transferred the second the Hufflepuff was deemed

eligible to take the seat. Finch-Fletchley would take his Vow of Unity and appoint Snape as Regent, a position he would hold until Justin turned 25, at which point Snape would step down and receive a sizeable chunk of the Prince family's assets as reward for his service to the family.

Snape's eyes lit up almost cruelly as he contemplated how his bigoted grandfather, the last Lord Prince, would have reacted to this turn of events. Indeed, the Slytherin had briefly considered changing his name to Severus Prince before discarding the idea. He'd spent years as a Potions Master and teacher, working diligently to ensure that the name Severus Snape *meant* something. And now, he took savage satisfaction at the thought of someone named *Snape* sitting among the lords and ladies of the Wizengamot.

He smirked. "*Forget about grandfather's reaction! I wonder what dear old Dad would have thought about it!*"

His thoughts about various awful dead relatives were disrupted by a knock on his door. Grumbling, he headed over to see who it was. After Lily and Remus, he almost dreaded to see who it might be at this late hour.

And lo and behold, it was *Harry Potter*.

"Mr. Potter," Snape said. "To what new disaster do I owe this late-night visit?"

"No disaster, sir," the boy said cheerfully. "I understand you'll be at tomorrow's Wizengamot meeting anyway on behalf of Justin Finch-Fletchley. But... well, I *always* keep my promises."

With that, Harry held out an envelope to his Head of House. With narrowed eyes, Snape took it and ripped it open.

Inside, there was *an engraved invitation*.

## Chapter End Notes

Next: If you don't know what the engraved invitation is for, go reread Chapter 31 of The Secret Enemy (Chapter 65 of the entire work).

AN1: Just to remove any possible confusion, no, Cornelius Fudge is not an Unspeakable. At least one person who will play an important role in POS going forward ... is.

AN2: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P\*\*\*\*\*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN3 (What the Sinister Man is reading):

"Far Too Many Time Travelers" by Lord Jeram has updated. I think I mentioned it before, but I'm pleased to see it continue. Also, it is perhaps apropos after Harry and Hermione's recent jaunts through time.

"In Which Sirius Black Fails to Argue With a Hat" by flamethrower (on Ao3). Sirius Black is Sorted into Slytherin and the whole world changes. Well, in some ways.

AN4: Special thanks to my Discord editors:  
Anne-Athema Codex, blowback123, BlueWater5,  
darkphoenix31, Dude, FeatheryMinx, Fionan, Gabe,  
Krisni, Luc the Virtual Arm Twister, Magica, nik, No  
One, pizdets UTC+100, Pokeflute, TNT, Ulf, and  
ZombeyUnicorn.

AN5: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 13,667. Followers:  
14,563. Favorites: 12,708. Communities: 215. Go Team  
POS!

# Lords of the Wizengamot

## Chapter Notes

### SHAMELESS PLUG!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### ***Harry Potter and the Death Eater Menace***

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***Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.***

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### ***Chapter 48: Lords of the Wizengamot***

***Potter Manor  
29 March 1994  
6:00 a.m.***

James's eyes shot open in response to the alarm clock next to his bed going off. Rather than a traditional ringing alarm,



it had been enchanted to scream "WAKE UP! WAKE UP!" at him. Lily hated it. He reached over to slap the alarm into silence and then, with a groan, he pulled himself up to a sitting position on the side of the bed before rubbing the sleep from his eyes. It was only then that James noticed the intense light from a small object on his nightstand.

It was the Remembrall that Dumbledore gave him, and its sudden intensity meant that it had completed its job of reconstructing the memories that Peter Pettigrew had hidden away.

James put his glasses on before carefully picking up the Remembrall as if it were incredibly fragile. Or perhaps incredibly dangerous. Then, he picked his wand up off the nightstand and, after a deep shaky breath, tapped it three times against the Remembrall.

There was a blinding flash of light.

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### ***Then ...***

"Are you sure about this, Pads?" James asked cautiously. "Lily's been preparing to cast the Fidelius for a while now, and she's almost ready to start. This is not the best time to start changing things."

"On the contrary, Prongs," Sirius said excitedly. "This is the *absolute* best time to change things. You already announced at an Order meeting that I would be the Secret Keeper. So, if we do have a spy among us, it just means that the Dark Wanker will be going after the wrong person! It's the perfect Marauders' Prank!"

James frowned. "I don't like the idea of thinking of this as a *prank*, Sirius. We're not in school anymore. And I don't

care about putting one over on You-Know-Who as much as I do about protecting the people I care about."

He turned to the nervous twitchy wizard sitting next to Sirius, perhaps the last person he'd have ever expected to see here in this situation.

"What about you, Peter? Do you really feel up to something like this? It could be incredibly dangerous for you."

Peter shrugged and rubbed his hands together self-consciously. "I-I'll be fine. It's like Sirius just said. No one will ever believe someone as ... *pitiful* as me is your Secret Keeper." He gave a nervous laugh. "Hell, if it comes down to it, I can just turn into a rat and go hide in the sewers somewhere until this is all over."

James looked unsure. "We should at least tell Dumbledore. And Remus..."

Peter shook his head furiously. "We don't know who the spy is, James. I trust the Headmaster, of course, but he says he's got his own spy among the Death Eaters but won't say who it is. What if he's put his faith in a double-agent? Or, I don't know, what if You-Know-Who has a way to spy on him that we can't even imagine? As wise as Dumbledore is, he can't possibly know as much about Dark Magic as You-Know-Who. And as for Remus ..."

Pettigrew trailed off uncertainly. James's eyes widened.

"You can't think that Moony is the spy?! You of all people!"

"I didn't want to believe it either, Prongs," Sirius said firmly. "But hear Peter out."

With visible reluctance, as if embarrassed to speak ill of the fourth Marauder, Peter hesitantly explained.

"I've heard stories ... stories about the werewolves in Europe allied with You-Know-Who. Their attacks are growing bolder, but also more ... *organized*. A lot more organized than any werewolf pack has a right to be. Some people are saying that You-Know-Who has figured out a way to mentally influence them or found someone else who can do so. I *know* Remus would never deliberately betray the Order or the Marauders. But if the Death Eaters can influence werewolves as thoroughly as they can Imperius wizards, Remus might be a double-agent *and not even know it!*"

James leaned back slowly and considered what he'd heard. Finally, he peered deep into Pettigrew's eyes as if searching for something.

"Peter, are you ... are you *sure* this is what you want?"

Pettigrew nodded bashfully. "I ... know I haven't been the best Gryffindor or the bravest. Certainly not like you two. For a long time, I wasn't sure why the Hat made me one in the first place. But I know now. I *am* a Gryffindor, and I'm ready to step up and prove it."

He leaned forward towards James with an earnest expression. "I know what I'm doing and why." And then, Peter smiled. "Believe me. I'll do Gryffindor proud."

Doubt and worry washed over James's face, but finally he slowly nodded his approval. "Okay, Peter. You win. You'll be our Secret Keeper."

Sirius clapped Peter on the shoulder almost affectionately before turning back to James.

"I won't let you down either, Prongs," he said cheerfully. "I promise you. Nothing is going to go wrong. This plan is *perfect*!"

---

***Now ...***

The Remembrall slipped through nerveless fingers and dropped to the floor before rolling under the bed. James sat transfixed, his eyes wide with absolute horror, his mouth hanging open as he struggled to speak and even to breathe.

"Oh ... Oh *God* ... Sirius ... No!"

Elsewhere in the home, the house elves all looked fearfully in the direction of the Master bedroom as a wail of regret and shame and despair echoed through the halls of Potter Manor.

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### ***The Contemplation Hall*** ***7:45 a.m.***

The somewhat pompously named "Contemplation Hall" was actually a series of interconnected rooms adjacent to the Wizengamot Chamber. Its name was derived from its official purpose – to provide an area for the members of the Wizengamot to withdraw and give reasoned thought to the issues that were before the body. In practice, the Contemplation Room basically functioned as a private club for the Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot and was used less for contemplation than for gossip, naps between sessions, and the discreet exchange of favors and occasionally outright bribes. Its largest room was a dining area for those members who did not have an opportunity to eat breakfast before early morning sessions or who simply wanted a snack during breaks in the proceedings. It also

had a fully-stocked bar, though it was not open this early in the morning. The Founding Families did believe in having *some* decorum, after all.

Today, Elphias Doge (who was not only Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of Doge but also its sole surviving member) sat alone at a table and picked at the remains of his breakfast while reading through the day's agenda. He glanced up and smiled as two familiar faces came to join him, each bearing a plate of food from the nearby buffet.

"Albus! Barty!" he exclaimed. "I was wondering if you'd make it back in time for this foofaraw. How was Paris?"

"Miserable," Barty Crouch replied irritably. "Rainy and full of French people, as usual. We got back late last night. Everything went smoothly." He spared a mild glare towards Albus Dumbledore who took a seat beside him.

"In fact," he added reproachfully, "there was more strife *within* the British delegation than between us and the other representatives!"

Albus sighed. "Barty, my old friend, you know the basis for my objections. But since you and young Ludo successfully pushed through the proposal in my absence, I consider the matter closed. Take your victory and move on."

"What were your objections about, Albus?" Elphias inquired, but it was Barty who answered.

"I managed to get the entirety of next year's interscholastic tournament paid for by the ICW plus extra funding for Hogwarts that makes up the budget hole left from losing last year's Mandrake crop, and Albus is still complaining because in exchange we agreed to incorporate a priceless

historical relic into the tournament in order to increase public interest."

"What Barty neglects to mention is that the artifact in question is over 3,000 years old and we don't know who made it originally or how it works, but we do know it has the power to strip wizards of their magic or even kill them outright. And so naturally, the ICW wants to bring it into a school full of children."

"It will be perfectly safe, Albus," Crouch said testily.

Albus merely shook his head. Despite their intense disagreements on many issues, Albus Dumbledore and Barty Crouch had maintained a rocky friendship for over fifty years. That friendship had nearly broken in the 1970's over Crouch's draconian choices as DMLE head during the war against Voldemort, but Albus knew the reasons for his friend's blind zealotry. In 1971, Barty Crouch had five children and two grandchildren. Ten years later, he had no living relatives at all save for his estranged cousin Augusta. Every other member of House Crouch had died at the hands of Death Eaters save for his wife, who died of illness, and his youngest boy, Barty Jr., who had *joined* the murderers of his extended family and perished in Azkaban for his crimes. It was not until years later, after unexpectedly losing the 1990 Ministry election to Cornelius Fudge, that Crouch and Dumbledore met for drinks to commiserate and finally heal the rift between them.

Of course, while their friendship had been repaired, it did not change Dumbledore's private belief that Crouch from time to time could be a pig-headed arse.

Meanwhile, Crouch sniffed the air loudly before leaning over to smell the food on his plate. Satisfied that his ham

and eggs had not gone off, he turned to Doge.

"What *is* that smell?" he asked.

Elphias shrugged. "Something to do with the Ministry ventilation systems, I gather. You must have arrived in the Atrium and taken the elevator down. Every part of the Ministry that doesn't have built-in air freshening Charms smells of wet fur for some reason. It's only really bad if you ride the elevators though."

Barty snorted and then went on a rant about how the smell had turned him off his breakfast and someone really ought to do something, etc. etc. Albus ignored the other wizard's tirade and turned his attention to his oldest friend. Or at least in the sense of being the person who had been his friend the longest. Albus, of course, had great many "old" friends and several who were actually "older" than Doge in the chronological sense. But Albus and Elphias had been sorted into Gryffindor together in 1882 and stayed close ever since. Doge, like Crouch, was the last of his name, Lord of a House that seemed doomed to extinction when each of them passed.

"So, Elphias, other than ambient malodors, is there anything noteworthy on the agenda for today besides the now-resolved Azkaban crisis?"

Doge shrugged casually. "A few matters of House business, but I haven't heard any details. One raised by Malfoy and the other by Potter. I gather Potter's business involves his Heir."

He handed over the agenda to his friend, and Albus studied the last note for a few seconds.

"*Oh James,*" Albus thought with a grimace. "*What are you up to now?*"

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## ***The Wizengamot Chamber***

### ***9:40 a.m.***

"Chief Warlock," said the court reporter. "252 votes have been cast to open this Special Session of the Wizengamot. The quorum of 220 votes has been met."

"So noted," Dumbledore said. "As Chief Warlock, I hereby call this Special Session to order."

The Viewing Gallery was packed, but from his vantage point in the Potter box, Harry could see Lily and Jim watching the proceedings. Harry had made a point of giving James his Heir's Ring back right after swearing his Vow the day before, and as Jim sat down, he noticed it was already on the boy's finger. Which was technically premature, but Harry was hardly going to complain about it at this stage.

Harry had managed to avoid Lily for most of Friday, but they did speak briefly after dinner. He assured her that he was leaving House Potter of his own free will and was eager to do so. She, in turn, revealed that James had already told her of his decision and of the Vow he'd sworn. To Harry's amusement, she also praised him on getting a guarantee of eleven million galleons from James.

He had been evasive on the topic of whether he would consent to move in with her full-time after today. He obviously would not be doing so as an Evans, and to be honest, he suspected that after all of today's festivities were done, moving in with his mother in *any* capacity might no longer be on the table. He hoped neither she nor Jim would hold a grudge over it, but he had no such expectations for



James. Speaking of Jim, Lily had said that his brother had wanted to come and show his support for Harry. Given the Imperius he was under, Harry rather doubted that was the case, especially what with the ring already sitting on Jim's finger.

*"And hey! I guess Pettigrew didn't curse it after all,"* he thought with some amusement.

Further down, Harry noticed Rufus Scrimgeour sitting among the other Order of Merlin holders. Pius Thicknesse ("The Man of the Hour" according to breathless *Daily Prophet* articles) sat next to him in an Auror's formal dress. Apparently, Rufus planned to nominate Thicknesse for an Order of Merlin during today's session, which would likely drive James Potter to distraction if he didn't have other things on his plate.

Closer by, Harry could see Professor Snape and Justin Finch-Fletchley. Justin would be taking his vow at the close of the session, right before the Potters' business. Despite his Muggleborn heritage, Justin sat as regally as any Pureblood. Closer still, Artemus Podmore and Hestia Jones sat together in the Black box, a fact that caused a brief spate of excited muttering when they first sat down as the Black Seat had sat empty for almost fifteen years. Old Arcturus had never permitted anyone else to represent his family's interests. When he had a debilitating stroke in 1979 that left him unable to attend meetings or even leave the Black ancestral home, there had been no instructions left in place for a regency or even a proxy. Artie and Hestia's presence in that box gave clear indication that they would be representing Sirius Black's interests today.

Artie would also be representing Harry today, though in a slightly different capacity.

After the Chief Warlock formally opened the session, he called upon Minister Fudge to deliver his speech to the assembly. In Harry's layman's opinion, it was a good speech full of soaring rhetoric about the Ministry and the people of Wizarding Britain "*standing firm against the ruinous fear engendered by the last remnants of the Death Eater Insurgency.*" It was a bit stiffer and more pompous than his speech given the day before, but of course, he wasn't the opening act for the Weird Sisters today. At the conclusion of the speech, Fudge raised four points.

"First," Fudge noted, "the resolution of the crisis leaves us with an unexpected moral dilemma. The three surviving Death Eaters in DMLE custody had all suffered Death of Personality. While their prior sentences to Azkaban remain valid, there is now a legal question for the Wizengamot as to whether prisoners who have '*died*' in such a manner should be recommitted to Azkaban. Moreover, because they are now complete amnesiacs no longer capable of developing any new long-term memories, it is impossible for them to have any '*happy memories*' for Dementors to feed upon. Consequently, both the Department of Mysteries and the Warden of Azkaban have expressed concern about how the Dementors might respond to the presence of high security prisoners upon whom they cannot feed. With that, I open the floor for questions and discussion."

After some spirited back and forth lasting about twenty minutes, the Regent Longbottom surprised everyone, including Fudge, by calling for the matter to be held in abeyance until the Unspeakables could deliver a full report on the Tabula Rasa and the prognosis for the Lestranges and Rookwood at the next regular Wizengamot session scheduled for later in the month. The motion passed unanimously, though Harry suspected that it was mainly a matter of kicking the can down the road because it was a

Special Session and most of the Wizengamot did not want to spend an entire Saturday mired in an ethical debate.

For a second, Minister Fudge's expression seemed mildly annoyed as he took a moment to write something in the margins of his prepared speech. However, when he spoke again, he seemed unperturbed by the delay of a ruling and advised Director Bones that those three prisoners would remain in DMLE custody pending further consideration by government, which she accepted with equanimity.

"The second matter I wish to raise before this august body deals with Sirius Black," Fudge continued. "As I'm sure you all are aware from reading the papers, we now have conclusive evidence that Sirius Black was innocent of the crimes for which he was sent to Azkaban so many years ago."

There was a general commotion in response to that, which ended abruptly with the bang of the Chief Warlock's gavel. Fudge called upon Amelia Bones to deliver a report on the matter. Bones was succinct but thorough. When the missing Death Eaters were recovered, the Aurors also found memory samples whose authenticity was confirmed by the Unspeakables. The memories indicated that a Metamorphmagus and Death Eater named Marcellus Frump impersonated Sirius Black while using the Imperius Curse to enslave many prominent citizens to You-Know-Who's will. Saul Croker also stood when called upon and tersely confirmed that the Unspeakables examined the memories thoroughly and vouched for their authenticity. If Croker at one point in his report happened to glance first at the Chief Warlock and then directly at Harry Potter, few would have remarked on it.

"Was it also this ... *Frump* person who led Sirius Black to betray the Boy-Who-Lived and his family to You-Know-Who?" asked Lady Brown. "Or was that of Black's own free will?"

In response, James Potter slowly rose.

"Lady Brown, Members of the Wizengamot. It is with great sadness that I must confess ... that Sirius Black was *not* our Secret Keeper. It appears now that I was Confunded and Memory Charmed through dark magic to believe otherwise these many years. The curse I was under – which somehow was undetectable via Remembrall – was finally broken just this morning, and I can now state unequivocally that Black did not betray my family, though – as a result of Death Eater treachery – I did betray him. I can only hope that, at some point, Sirius Black, who I once treated as a brother, can find it in his heart to forgive me."

With that, James sat down without further comment. There was more surprised muttering from the gallery that was swiftly gavelled into silence by Dumbledore.

"Where is Sirius Black now?" asked Lord Doge.

"He's upstairs in my office, actually," Fudge said mildly. Harry thought the Minister seemed to enjoy the sudden commotion his casual words caused. "On the advice of his Healer, he has elected not to attend these proceedings in person, though he is listening to them over the Wireless in my office. On that note, I turn the floor over to Madam Hestia Jones of the law firm of Podmore & Associates, who has a statement to deliver on behalf of Lord Black."

Hestia rose and addressed the Wizengamot with Artie sitting beside her and bearing an oddly proud expression.

"My honorable Lords and Ladies, Ministry Officials, and Citizens. I am Hestia Jones Esq., and I am honored to stand before you on behalf of my client, Sirius Orion Lord Black. Lord Black contacted our office this past Thursday just a few hours after Minister Fudge announced publicly that his case was being revisited. On his behalf, I negotiated a meeting between the Minister and Lord Black late last evening. We briefly considered having Lord Black appear today to speak to the Wizengamot and to formally take his Vow of Unity, but his Healer recommended against that. Lord Black is still gravely ill as a result of his lengthy incarceration, and it was felt that the stress of appearing in front of so many people might cause him serious trauma and delay his recovery, to say nothing of the possible stress on his magic from uttering a Vow of Unity.

"Consequently, and at Lord Black's direction, I present myself to this body today as Temporary Proxy for the Ancient and Noble House of Black. Sirius will formally take his Vow of Unity at a future date once he has been cleared to do so by his Healers. Until then, I will stand before you in his place and represent the Black seat under the Special Circumstances provision of the Inheritance Act."

At that point, Lucius Malfoy raised his wand and was recognized by the Chief Warlock.

"Madam Jones, for those among us unfamiliar with the Special Circumstances provision, can you explain its workings to us? Surely you do not expect us to approve of Black claiming his ancestral seat without first swearing an Oath of Unity! Or even a showing of his mental and physical capacity to serve!"

Although Lucius's remarks might have suggested disapproval of Sirius taking the Black seat, Artie had

anticipated some opposition both from the "Death Eater adjacent" wing of the Wizengamot and from those individuals allied with James Potter, who currently controlled Sirius's votes. And so, Lucius had offered to raise the issue preemptively in a way that Hestia could address and dispense with.

"Respectfully, Lord Malfoy," she answered, "no such approval is sought or required. Sirius Black is Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of Black by operation of the Black family charter, and the Wizengamot's own charter forbids any other party from interfering in the internal workings of any founding family. Absent a legal basis for denying Sirius Black's claim to his Lordship – and no such basis exists since he is guilty of no Azkaban-worthy crime and no other viable candidate for Lord has ever been put forth – this body lacks the legal authority to exclude him from claiming this seat and appointing whoever he wishes as his Proxy while he is recuperating.

"Similarly, the Special Circumstances provision of the Inheritance Act is part of a *magical law* fully binding on both this body and this nation. The provision states in relevant part that when the legitimate claimant to an ancestral seat cannot immediately swear the Vow of Unity due to issues of health, age, or other special circumstances, the swearing of the Vow may be deferred for up to six months, with the Lord or Lady permitted all the powers, rights and obligations of any other voting member during the interim."

There were a few more perfunctory questions from various parties, but no one wanted to be the person who stood in the way of Sirius Black claiming a dormant Ancient and Noble seat after years of false imprisonment. Although he maintained a demeanor of mild curiosity during the

discussion, Harry was positively giddy on the inside. The Wizengamot had accepted all their legal arguments about the Special Circumstances clause without objection.

Which would be very convenient for Harry before the session was done.

Once all the issues relevant to the Black seat were resolved (including an acknowledgement by James Potter that all Black votes would be returned to House Black effective immediately), Fudge rose again to address the chamber.

"Thank you, Madam Jones. Moving on, the third matter I wish to bring up for discussion, if only for information purposes, is that the DMLE's investigation has identified two individuals who we now suspect of being active Death Eaters loyal to You-Know-Who but who escaped discovery until now. As the investigation is ongoing, I will not reveal their names at this time. But one of the two is in DMLE custody and undergoing interrogation even as we speak. We anticipate bringing him here to trial very soon."

There was another murmur of excitement from the crowd that Dumbledore quickly banged into silence. In the viewing gallery, the Boy-Who-Lived wiped away some tears, though Lily kept her composure. James simply stared down at the table in front of him. Between their reactions, James's admission that someone other than Sirius Black was their Secret Keeper, and the conspicuous absence of the Potter Seneschal and Proxy, Harry wondered if there was anyone in the room who hadn't figured out already that Pettigrew was one of the secret Death Eaters.

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***Meanwhile in the DMLE Detention Wing ...***

Of course, there were other people in the building who were well-aware of Peter Pettigrew's status as a secret Death Eater. Not that it was much of a secret anymore. After interrogators confronted Pettigrew with Lily Potter's memories of his confession, his formerly concealable Dark Mark became fully visible. This confirmed what the DMLE had suspected for years: that marked Death Eaters could somehow conceal their marks until such time as they were *known* conclusively to be a Death Eater, at which point the Mark could no longer be hidden. Presumably, it was a property built into the Mark by Voldemort, a punishment for secret Death Eaters who were foolish enough to get caught in the act.

At the moment, Pettigrew lay alone in his cell with nothing to keep him company save a persistent rattling sound in the air vent above his cot. The room was saturated with anti-Animagus Charms to keep him from trying to use that air vent to escape, and so the man just lay there nursing the black eye he'd gotten during one of his interrogations when one of the questioners decided to take a little revenge on him for the injuries suffered by the hit wizards who'd visited his apartment.

Those interrogations had gone on into the night but had yielded nothing useful. Now, the traitor was left alone in his cell while his guards listened to the Wizengamot proceedings over the Wireless. With conventional techniques of no use, the DMLE was waiting for the word to send him down to the DOM for some more exotic forms of interrogation. Privately, however, the DMLE guards keeping watch over the detention wing agreed that Pettigrew was probably too emotionally damaged to yield any useful intelligence. While they couldn't actively watch him in his cell, they could hear him quite well. And after the last interrogation (which was really more of a beating than a



true interrogation), Pettigrew had been reduced to odd babbling mutters and to badly humming some song the guards didn't recognize. Their consensus was that the man's mind was broken.

They were wrong.

Peter lay on his cot and nursed his swollen eye and sore ribs. Then, he once again heard a very soft sound from the air vent. It was a very faint clicking noise not unlike the sound of tiny claws against metal, followed by several soft squeaks. Peter closed his eyes and started babbling to himself once more, but with some soft squeaks and clicks of his own mixed in with the general nonsense sounds. There were a few more squeaks from the vent, and then the clicking sound resumed before receding as the author of those sounds moved away through the duct work.

Peter closed his eyes, smiled, and resumed his tuneless singing to pass the time.

*"Skee-dooby-do. Scoobity do. Dooby-do-woo."*

The guards noted his weak attempt at music but then went back to ignoring him in favor of the Minister's speech on the Wireless.

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### ***Back in the Wizengamot Chamber...***

"On a related note," Fudge continued, "I now yield the floor to my good friend and former colleague, Rufus Scrimgeour, OOM, Chief Auror Emeritus."

There was a brief applause as Rufus climbed to his feet.

"Thank you all. I stand before you today, no longer as a servant of the people, but here solely by virtue of my status as holder of an Order of Merlin. Yet it is my honor to speak to you all today in my dual capacity of OOM recipient and former law enforcement officer. Because I speak on behalf of someone who currently stands as a Senior Auror and who I believe is worthy of recognition and distinction."

While Pius Thicknesse actually *blushed* in the seat next to him, Rufus gave a glowing account of Thicknesse's role in capturing both Fenrir Greyback's pack and the escaped Azkaban prisoners. In fact, "glowing account" might have been an understatement, as Harry thought the older Slytherin might be laying it on a bit thick. It was a good thing for Thicknesse that Scrimgeour wasn't the only person in the room who thought his star was on the rise. As Rufus reached the end of his speech and then officially nominated the Senior Auror for an Order of Merlin, 1st Class, Cornelius Fudge immediately seconded the motion which passed easily on a voice vote with no opposition.

"Thank you, Mr. Scrimgeour. And congratulations, Senior Auror Thicknesse, OOM!" After another brief round of applause, Fudge returned to his speech.

"The DMLE believes that the other suspected Death Eater is presently abroad. As I said, the investigation is ongoing, and so I will not reveal the suspect's name at this time. But if the evidence eventually shows her guilt, I promise you that we will have justice for her victims even if we must pursue her to the ends of the Earth!"

There was only a smattering of applause for that, mainly because few knew who Fudge was even talking about beyond "an unknown female Death Eater." But some people did know. Harry glanced over to Lord Nott's box, where

Tiberius's face showed barely concealed fury at the thought of the DMLE pursuing Narcissa Black "to the ends of the Earth." He turned towards his rival, Lucius Malfoy, and glared murderously. Malfoy noticed and turned towards Tiberius to offer him a polite nod and a *smile*, thereby confirming Nott's suspicions that Malfoy had played some role in Narcissa's exposure.

As Harry studied the two men, he tilted his head slightly as the beginnings of an idea sprouted in his head. Then, he looked around the chamber and mentally started counting votes. Meanwhile, Fudge continued.

"Fourth and finally, with the last remnants of the Death Eater Insurgency either captured or on the run, I am *honored* to declare that the Azkaban crisis is effectively resolved. It was my ... *intention* to formally surrender my powers as Praetor Maximus immediately upon the conclusion of this session. However, with the disposition of the Lestrangle Brothers and Augustus Rookwood held in abeyance, I feel it inappropriate to do so while the job is not yet quite finished. Accordingly, I hereby declare instead that my time as Praetor Maximus shall end immediately upon the final disposition of those three traitors – however this body chooses to dispose of them – and that of the two unnamed suspects I mentioned previously. My hope is that both those matters are resolved by the end of the month. Regardless, I thank you all for the faith you have all shown to me by conferring such power upon me, but I am happy to return once more to the office of humble Minister for Magic. But I say this to the Wizengamot and to our citizenry listening at home by Wizarding Wireless: Whatever the future holds, we, ever your servants, will continue to defend your liberty and repel the forces that seek to take it from you! Your Ministry... remains... *strong*!"

Fudge's final pronouncement was met with thunderous applause from the gallery despite the Chief Warlock's best efforts to gavel the chamber back into order. After a few seconds, some of the observers started chanting the Minister's name. "*FUDGE! FUDGE! FUDGE!*" Harry found the whole scene quite amusing, though it suddenly gave him a craving for chocolate. The more conservative elements of the Wizengamot were less amused, as were various individuals in the audience who'd been considering a run for Fudge's job in the next election. While the septennial election was still a few years away, the incumbent appeared to have just greatly improved his reelection chances.

Finally, after a minute or so, Dumbledore fired off some loud fireworks from his wand.

"Now that I have your attention," he said mildly, "I would remind you all to respect the solemnity of this chamber. While I recall the Minister's predecessor making international headlines through her infamous declaration of Britain's '*inalienable right to party*' at the conclusion of the Death Eater conflict, she still upheld the value of decorum."

Chastened, the crowd quieted down, and Dumbledore turned his attention back to the Minister. "Minister Fudge, the Wizengamot thanks you for your stirring words and your sterling service. Have you anything more to add?"

"No, Chief Warlock," the Minister said while puffing himself up. "I yield the floor."

Dumbledore nodded to the Minister before addressing everyone else. "This concludes the primary purpose of today's special session. Before I adjourn, however, I am informed that there are two matters of House business

added to the agenda, one by House Malfoy and one by House Potter. The Wizengamot calls Lord Malfoy to speak."

Lucius Malfoy rose from his chair and addressed the room with his usual poise.

"Thank you, Chief Warlock. Though in truth, I rise not to address a matter for House Malfoy per se but simply from my position as a member of this body. Article 9 of the Wizengamot Charter allows any British magical citizen the right to petition any Noble House for an opportunity to address and be heard by this assembly. One highly esteemed member of our society – and someone whose friendship I have valued for many years – has so petitioned House Malfoy, and I am more than happy to grant his request to speak today. Accordingly, House Malfoy opens the floor to Severus Tobias Snape, Potions Master and Hogwarts Professor."

With that, Snape descended from the gallery and strode confidently down into the well of the chamber to stand before the Chief Warlock. Justin followed him down and stood beside him. While the man covered it well, Harry was pretty sure Dumbledore was surprised by Snape's appearance.

"The Wizengamot welcomes you, Professor Snape," he said. "At Lord Malfoy's request, the Wizengamot will entertain your petition."

Snape bowed respectfully. "Thank you, Chief Warlock," he said in silky tones that nevertheless resonated throughout the chamber.

"I have come before the Wizengamot today to invoke a seldom used article of British wizarding law, yet also one with a storied history and which remains legally valid.

Standing beside me is Justin Finch-Fletchley, a Third Year Hufflepuff and also a Muggleborn."

At that, there were a few derisive snorts from several of the more conservative (and bigoted) Lords and Ladies, though Dumbledore quickly gavelled them into silence. Snape was unperturbed.

"Though Mr. Finch-Fletchley's parents are Muggles, they are desirous that their son fully integrate himself into our world. To that end, and pursuant to the Muggleborn Integration Act of 1783, the boy's parents have asked me to assume the role of Magical Guardian, and I have agreed to accept that responsibility. I stand before the Wizengamot today because my guardianship and his wardship will not become official until the members of this chamber be given an opportunity to register objection and, if there be none, the Chief Warlock signs the guardianship papers."

As Snape spoke, Dumbledore accepted a parchment from the Court Reporter which outlined the guardianship agreement and was signed by Snape, Justin, and Justin's parents. While he reviewed the paperwork, Lord Ogden raised his wand and was recognized.

"House Ogden rises to a point of inquiry. Forgive me, Potions Master Snape, but ... if the boy is a Hufflepuff, why would the Slytherin Head of House wish to become his guardian?"

"For one simple reason, Lord Ogden," Snape replied evenly. "As it happens, the two of us are very distantly related. Despite our different house affiliations, each of us is the other's sole living magical relative."

Ogden nodded at that. Nearby, Lucius Malfoy sat quietly and hoped that no one else in the room knew the maiden

name of Snape's mother.

"Everything seems to be in order," Dumbledore said before addressing the room. "Does any member wish to present an argument against Professor Snape's assumption of guardianship rights over Mr. Finch-Fletchley?"

No objections were raised, most likely because none of the Lords or Ladies who might otherwise have complained just on principle cared overmuch about a Halfblood assuming guardianship over a Mudblood. Lucius leaned back in his chair and smiled. The tricky bit was over. Now the fun would begin.

Dumbledore banged his gavel. "Hearing no objections, I see no reason why this guardianship should not be ratified forthwith."

Then, he picked up a quill and signed his name to the bottom of the parchment before tapping it with his wand. It disappeared, and copies were magically and instantly registered with the relevant Ministry departments.

"So mote it be," he said to signify that the legalities were complete.

"Thank you, Chief Warlock," Snape said smoothly. "And with that formality complete, I open the floor to my young ward, who has an announcement for the Wizengamot."

With that, the Slytherin took a step back, and the Hufflepuff stepped forward while pulling a prepared speech from his pocket.

"Chief Warlock, my Lords and Ladies, Ministry Officials, and Citizens. I stand before you today and address this body as ward of Severus Tobias Snape. I am deeply grateful to

Professor Snape for accepting the burden of guardianship for many reasons, but most importantly, because of the opportunity it gives me to stand before you all ... and stake my claim. I am Justin Finch-Fletchley, the son of two Muggles, Sir Malcolm Finch-Fletchley, O.B.E. and Dame Barbara Finch-Fletchley née Woodnutt. My mother is the only child of Jonathan Woodnutt, the 12th Duke of Forgill. Through him, I claim direct lineal descent from Duncan Woodnutt, the 1st Duke of Forgill and his wife, Mary Woodnutt née Prince. Before her marriage, Mary Prince was the squib great-granddaughter of Robert Prince, who founded the House of Prince which was elevated to Noble status in 1655."

*That* was enough to send a wave of muttering through the Wizengamot, but Justin continued without concern.

"In chartering his Noble House, Robert Prince desired to avoid an issue which has plagued many of the Houses of the Wizengamot over the centuries: line extinction resulting from inheritance requirements which were too restrictive. Accordingly, he chose to emulate the more progressive houses of the day and designed a charter so that if there were no Pureblooded heirs eligible to become Head of House Prince, that role could pass to any Halfblood or even Muggleborn who met certain additional requirements. Specifically, the claimant must be a wizard or witch, must be able to prove blood descent from Robert Prince, and must have either at least one wizarding parent *or* a magical guardian who can also claim biological descent from Robert Prince. There is no requirement that either the claimant or the guardian actually be considered members of the Prince family by name, only by blood."

Justin put the prepared notes away and looked around the room. "With the guardianship of Professor Snape, I have



now met all of those requirements. Accordingly, I stand before the Wizengamot and present myself as Heir Presumptive of the Noble House of Prince as recognized by the Prince family charter and so certified by Gringotts Bank. Is there anyone here who can contest my claim?"

The prior mutterings grew into a loud rumble of discontent from around the chamber which grew louder even as Dumbledore continued to bang his gavel. Finally, Lord Crabbe literally jumped out of his chair and yelled out.

"BUT HE'S A MUD- !"

KRACKOWWW!

Dumbledore slammed the gavel so hard that it sounded like a *literal* thunderclap. The room went instantly silent. Crabbe's head jerked around to look at Dumbledore who returned the man's gaze levelly. The Chief Warlock said nothing, but he was giving Crabbe what James Potter had once referred to as *The Look*. Crabbe swallowed and slowly sat down. Then, Dumbledore addressed the assembly.

"The question has been put before the Wizengamot: Is there anyone here who can present any factual or legal basis for denying the young man's claim?" There was grumbling but no response. Dumbledore turned back to Justin and Snape.

"May I assume, Mr. Finch-Fletchley, that documentary evidence to support your claim has been presented to Gringotts in accordance with the various Goblin-Wizarding Treaties?"

"Yes, Chief Warlock," Justin answered confidently. "The goblins verified my ancestry and have given me provisional access to the Prince vault."

Dumbledore nodded and turned to the Court Reporter.  
"What does the Book say?"

"*The Book*," in this case, referred to the official Book of the Wizengamot which magically transcribed every utterance during an official session. Among its many magical properties was the ability to identify anyone who spoke before the assembly by their proper name as it was legally recognized under the laws of Wizarding Britain. The Court Reporter looked down at the perfect transcription of Justin's speech and nodded.

"The Book has updated, Chief Warlock. It now identifies the young man as Justin Finch-Fletchley, Heir Presumptive of the Noble House of Prince." Then, the Court Reporter blinked in surprise.

"I should add, Chief Warlock, that the Book also now identifies Professor Snape as *Regent Snape of the Noble House of Prince*."

"I shall explain," Snape said while stepping forward again. "As my ward correctly stated, the Prince Family Charter allows for a Muggleborn raised outside of the wizarding world to eventually assume lordship over the House in the absence of any other viable candidates, but any such Muggleborn must have a magical guardian of Prince descent who will serve as regent until the heir either reaches the age of 25 or completes a Mastery, whichever comes first. My mother, prior to her disownment, was Eileen Prince, the daughter of the most recent Lord Prince to hold the family seat. Even though my mother was disowned, the same charter provisions that allow my ward to claim the Heirship also allow me to assume the regency despite not officially being a member of House Prince."

"So noted," Dumbledore said. Then, he paused for a moment. "Is it your intention to activate the Prince Seat today?"

"Yes, Chief Warlock," Justin said. "Now that the Wizengamot has acknowledged my status, which the Book clearly shows it has, the funds to reactivate the Prince seat will automatically transfer."

The Court Reporter spoke up again. "The Book so reflects, Chief Warlock. The sum of 50,000 galleons has just been deposited into the Ministry account, earmarked as '*dues for the Noble House of Prince.*'"

The announcement was accompanied by a flash of light as two chairs suddenly materialized in the box that had been set aside for House Prince but which had been empty for decades.

Dumbledore looked pensive. "You do realize, Mr. ... that is, Heir Prince ... this means you must take your Vow of Unity at this time for your family seat to become fully active."

"Yes, Chief Warlock," Justin said gravely. "I am prepared to do so."

The Chief Warlock nodded almost sadly. "Then proceed."

The boy held his wand aloft and began to speak.

"Whereas there is no Lord or Lady Prince, I, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Heir Presumptive to the Noble House of Prince speak for my family and swear this Vow of Unity before my peers."

Then, he paused and took a deep breath before commencing the official Vow.

"Let Magic itself hear my oath and sanctify it. I stand in unity with the Wizengamot and the families both Noble and Ancient and Noble who are its foundation. Let my magic be bent to our collective purpose and so too the magic of my family and all who come after me lest they be forsworn and suffer expulsion. From the unification of my family magic with that of my peers, let there arise a deeper magic that is greater than the sum of its parts. From this day forward, I hereby submit myself to the will of the Wizengamot as expressed through its majority. I hereby accept the judgment of the will of the Wizengamot as expressed through its laws. I vow to act with the Wizengamot, and when we act as one, so shall we perform miracles. This I swear upon my life and unto the ending of the world. So mote it be!"

While there was no visible effect, Harry could feel the power of the magic invoked by Justin's oath as it permeated the whole chamber, causing goose bumps to form on his skin and the hair on his arms to rise. From his conversations with Artie, he knew it was somewhat unusual to see this oath uttered by an individual as opposed to the entire Wizengamot swearing it en masse. When new Lords (or in this case, Heirs forced to stand in as Lords) joined the Wizengamot, they swore individual oaths, but it was relatively rare since Lords and Ladies typically served for decades. If this sudden sensation of raw magic in the air came from just one 14-year-old swearing the Oath in front of him, what would it be like for Harry when he swore the oath himself later? Moreover, what would it be like in a few years when the Septennial came and *all* the Lords and Ladies renewed their vows together?

Harry had come to view the Wizengamot as a collection of dotty old men and women who sat around and played their political games. But this was his first exposure to the

immense magic that this body could bring to bear when its members were in accord. For the first time, he understood how something like the Ultimate Sanction could bind most of a nation, and he also realized how potentially dangerous it could be if a large enough majority agreed to use their collective magic for a truly terrible purpose.

"The Oath of Unity having been completed," Dumbledore said, "I hereby welcome the revived House of Prince to full status as a Noble House. Congratulations to both Heir Apparent Prince and to Regent Prince. You may claim your seats."

As they'd practiced, Snape and Justin bowed respectfully and then made their way proudly to the Prince box. There was a smattering of applause, but for the most part, the Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot sat still in wonder (and to some extent, absolute horror and outrage) that a *Muggleborn* had just claimed a Noble seat and there was nothing any of them could do about it. Several of the Lords who'd only narrowly escaped prosecution as Death Eaters openly glared towards Lord Malfoy who seemed to have engineered this shocking turn of events, but his expression was as relaxed and blasé as ever as he stood once more.

"That concludes House Malfoy's business, Chief Warlock," he said with remarkable understatement. "I yield the floor."

"So noted," said the Chief Warlock who was quite bemused at this turn of events. "In that case, the Wizengamot calls Lord Potter to speak."

There was a pause. "... Lord Potter?" Dumbledore asked again.

"Huh? Oh!" James jumped to his feet abruptly. The poor man, who'd been through a lot of shocks over the past few

days, had been so surprised and confused as to *what the hell just happened* with Malfoy, Snivellus and some Muggleborn kid that for a brief moment, he'd forgotten what was next. "House Potter calls forth its Heir Presumptive, Hadrian Remus Potter."

Harry rose from the Potter box and stepped down into the Well to join his father. Up in the Gallery, Lily watched the proceedings intently, but she couldn't help but be distracted by the show Severus had just put on. Granted, she'd probably had too much brandy during their last encounter, but she felt pretty sure that if Sev had mentioned that he was about to become a Regent to a Noble House, she'd have remembered it. Lily then noticed that immediately upon taking his seat in the Prince box, Snape quietly summoned a Ministry house elf which promptly disappeared on whatever mission he'd sent it.

"House Potter has two matters to bring before the Wizengamot, both involving my Heir Presumptive. First, having observed my son's demeanor, intelligence, poise, resourcefulness, and loyalty to Wizarding Britain, I, Iacomus Charlus Potter, Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter, do hereby declare that I judge him worthy of respect beyond what his youth would normally inspire. Through his quick thinking, the lives of both my wife and the Boy-Who-Lived were saved just the other day from a Death Eater traitor. As reward for his heroic deeds and recognition of his maturity and fitness to assume the role of a full wizard, I hereby exercise my authority as Lord of House Potter to grant Hadrian Remus Potter full emancipation and declare him a legal adult for all purposes not expressly barred to him on account of chronological age, including immediate elevation to Heir Apparent."

The crowd began to mutter again, but for once, Dumbledore didn't bang his gavel, as he was too shocked by James's pronouncement to notice the disturbance. True, he'd once broached the topic of emancipating Harry after his Third Year as a threat to force James to tell him the true reason for his hostility. But like this? His concerns were only barely assuaged by the fact that Harry Potter stood next to his father and looked completely at ease. Whatever was happening, it seemed that Harry understood it and was fine with it. Perhaps James and Harry had gotten over their differences with James offering emancipation as a shortcut to an early elevation to Heir Apparent. But somehow, the Chief Warlock doubted it.

As for Harry himself, he was inwardly jubilant. James had proclaimed his emancipation as they'd agreed. The law required James to make the formal announcement here, but there was no legal mechanism for anyone to stop it at this point. Also, Hestia and Artie had thoroughly reviewed the issue of what, if anything, would be expressly barred to him on account of chronological age, and they concluded the list was limited to four things. Even emancipated, Harry could not get an Apparition license, be free of the Trace, or legally vote until he was 17. The *fourth* and most important thing on the list technically applied only until he turned 14.

But then, that was what the Special Circumstances provision was for.

After several shocked seconds, Dumbledore gavelled the audience into silence before speaking slowly.

"The Wizengamot acknowledges Lord Potter's pronouncement. Is there anyone present who objects or has grounds to contest the granting of emancipation to Harry Potter?" Silence. "Very well. I hereby recognize Hadrian

Remus Potter, commonly known as Harry Potter, to be a legal adult for all purposes not explicitly barred by wizarding law. So mote it be."

Albus touched his wand to the orb on his desk which glowed brightly for a few seconds, signifying that Harry's emancipation had been legally recognized and was now a matter of public record.

"With that, Chief Warlock," James said with some difficulty, "I now yield the floor to ... my *Heir Apparent*."

Then, he stepped away stiffly and took his seat. At the next table, both Fudge and Bones were looking at him in confusion. Meanwhile, Harry moved to the center of the Well and looked up at the Chief Warlock with an expression of supreme confidence.

"The Wizengamot welcomes you, Heir Potter. What business do you bring before the chamber?"

"Thank you for your kind welcome, sir," Harry said before addressing the entire room. "Chief Warlock, my Lords and Ladies, Ministry Officials, and Citizens. I stand before you all today, so that you may all be witness to my vow and testify that Magic has accepted it."

With that, he pulled out his wand and held it aloft.

"I, born Hadrian Remus Potter, do hereby swear before the Wizengamot and Magic itself as follows: From this day forth and for the rest of my life, I hereby sever all ties and connections with House Potter. I hereby disclaim any inheritances, legacies, or familial rights associated with House Potter. I hereby deny Iacomus Charlus Potter and will henceforth no longer call him Father. I am a Potter no more. So mote it be."



There was a flash of light from Harry's wand, followed by an immediate commotion from the crowd. Again, Dumbledore was too shocked to notice.

"Harry!" he exclaimed in a breach of decorum. "Do you know what you have done?!"

And then, Harry *smiled* at the old man. "Yes, Chief Warlock. I know *exactly* what I have done."

Dumbledore stared at the boy and then looked over to James Potter who would not even meet his eye. Indeed, the man kept his head down, even as Bones and Fudge were hissing outraged questions at him.

Meanwhile, up in the Gallery, Lily looked down at her firstborn sadly. Despite everything, she wished it hadn't come to this. But then, she was suddenly distracted when she noticed the return of the Ministry house elf Severus had summoned earlier. The creature handed Severus a small paper sack before bowing and popping away once more. Then, the Prince Regent reached into the bag, removed a small bit of white fluffy food, and popped it into his mouth. Despite all the drama with Harry, Lily couldn't help but be distracted by the question now posed.

"*Why on Earth is Severus Snape eating popcorn during a Wizengamot session?*"

Finally, Dumbledore took a deep breath and gavelled the chamber back into order.

"The Oath ... is sworn. And being sworn in such manner, it is valid and binding and cannot be unsworn. Do you have anything to add ... Harry No-Name?"

The boy nodded, still completely unconcerned at everything that had just happened.

"A few matters, Chief Warlock. First of all, my name is *not* Harry No-Name. Through my late grandmother, Dorea Potter née Black, I am a child of House Black by blood. And I am pleased to report that my godfather, Sirius Orion Lord Black, has had opportunity to renew his Godfather's Oath and has offered me sanctuary in House Black. Accordingly, by blood and by magic, I am now Harry *Black*, as I believe the Court Reporter can attest."

The official coughed in excitement. "The young man is correct, Chief Warlock! The Book now registers him as Hadrian Remus Black!"

Dumbledore leaned back in surprise at that development, while the audience muttered in excitement. At his table, James suddenly looked up in shock at the unexpected announcement.

"Well," Dumbledore said with a sudden smile, "that rather changes things. I am pleased to recognize you by your new name, Mr. Black. Now, is there anything *else* you have to add before these proceedings are complete?"

"Just a few quick bits of House business to bring to the Wizengamot's formal attention, Chief Warlock."

Then, Harry smiled at him again.

For a second, Dumbledore paused at the boy's expression. Oddly, it was only now, after Harry had disclaimed his familial connection to James Potter, that Albus could truly see how much the two resembled one another. In fact, the look on Harry Black's face *right now* was the same angelic smile the Headmaster remembered seeing so many times

on a younger James Potter's face whenever the boy virtuously denied his obvious involvement in the planning of some Marauder prank. It reflected the *exact same* mixture of calculated innocence combined with the promise of imminent chaos.

"Forgive me, Mr. Pot- ... Mr. Black," he finally said. "But while you are now a member of the Black family, you are not entitled to speak to Black family matters. That is why your godfather has engaged a Proxy."

"I was not referring to any business of House Black, Chief Warlock," the boy said with the same guileless smile.

Albus looked down at him in confusion. "Well, you can hardly be entitled to speak to *Potter* family business seeing as how you've just disclaimed your birthright."

"Actually, Chief Warlock, I only disclaimed my *paternal* lineage," Harry said easily. "I *do* still have a *mother*, you know."

Up in the Gallery, Jim's forehead creased in confusion at Harry's words, confusion which only deepened when he glanced at his mother and saw her own expression. Lily Potter was leaning forward in her seat, her eyes wide, the blood draining from her face, as she suddenly whispered: "*Oh no. Oh, no, no, no.*"

Unaware of his mother's mounting panic, Harry continued. "Her name is Lily Potter née Evans. She is the daughter of the late Michael Evans and Rose Evans née Carmichael. Through Rose Carmichael and the six generations of Carmichaels who preceded her, I am the oldest male wizarding descendant of Hyacinth Carmichael..."

And then, the boy grinned broadly at Albus.

"... *née Wilkes!*"

"*Ah!*" Albus thought to himself as he banged the gavel furiously to restore order. "*There's the chaos.*"

As the furor began to die down, Harry continued.

"Hyacinth Wilkes was born in 1836, the daughter of then-Lord Atticus Wilkes of the Ancient and Noble House of Wilkes. She was a squib, and on her 11th birthday, her family abandoned her on the streets of London with nothing but the clothes on her back. She survived because the owner of a local pub found her, took pity on her, and gave her a job as a scullery maid. Later, at the age of 17, she married the owner's son, Albert Carmichael, and bore him four children, none of whom were magical. Indeed, magic remained dormant among Hyacinth's descendants until it emerged once more in my mother, my brother, and myself.

"I realize, of course, that the most recent Lord Wilkes, who served You-Know-Who, would have likely greatly disapproved of our familial connections. But since Erasmus Lord Wilkes died a traitor's death before I was even born, his opinion carries no weight. House Wilkes is a patrilineal family, and with the death of Erasmus Wilkes, there was no other male of the main family line to succeed him, not even a male child who could claim the seat under a regency. Happily, the original founder of House Wilkes, like the founder of House Prince, had the foresight to plan for such contingencies.

"When a sitting Lord Wilkes dies without male issue, the lordship passes to the next closest wizard in the extended family tree who can meet the appropriate requirements. Specifically, he must be an adult male wizard born of two wizarding parents, one of whom can also claim blood

descent from a prior Lord of House Wilkes. The charter is silent as to any required blood status, so the fact that I am a Halfblood is not an obstacle. In fact, I don't even have to bear the name Wilkes, and the surname of the family now known as Wilkes has indeed changed three times since its founding."

"EXCUSE ME!" bellowed Lord Goyle. "But I rise to a point of order! Erasmus Wilkes already had an heir at the time of his death!"

"No, sir, he did not," Harry answered easily. "True, his wife, Linnea Wilkes, was with child at the time of his death, but she gave birth to a daughter, Amaryllis Wilkes. As a female, Amaryllis cannot inherit directly under the family charter. Hypothetically, if she were to marry a wizard at some point in the future and give birth to a male child while there was no one else already holding the Lordship, it could indeed pass to her son. But Amaryllis Wilkes is *not* married, she is *12*, and even in the unlikely and offensive chance she were carrying a child out of wedlock, the future claim of any such unborn child cannot defeat the claim of someone who meets all the Lordship requirements right now."

He narrowed his eyes at Goyle "And I do hope, Lord Goyle, that you are not insinuating that my 12-year-old cousin Amaryllis, *who was left for you and your wife to raise all these years*, is carrying some wizard's bastard!"

Goyle made a short gargling noise in the back of his throat. "I ... withdraw my point of order," he mumbled before dropping back down in his seat. Harry turned back to face Dumbledore.

"Having researched my family history quite thoroughly, I can safely say that I am the only person who can satisfy the

requirements of the Wilkes charter. Indeed, except for legal adulthood, Gringotts verified that I met all the other requirements in 1992, and I have held the status of Heir Presumptive of House Wilkes since then. With my emancipation, all the legal requirements are met, and I am now Lord Wilkes. As I am sure the Book of the Wizengamot will agree."

With that, Harry looked meaningfully towards the Court Reporter who simply stared at him slack-jawed. Finally, Dumbledore noted the man's distress and coughed loudly.

"Is Mr. Black correct, Court Reporter?"

"Huh?! Oh! So sorry. Um ... yes. The Book now recognizes the young man as Hadrian Remus Black *Lord Wilkes*."

"HOW LONG HAVE YOU KNOWN ABOUT THIS?!" James Potter bellowed after shooting up out of his chair in a fury.

Harry turned back to him with an amiable expression. "Since June of 1992, Lord Potter. But as you'll recall, we were estranged at that point as a result of my Sorting, and I was concerned that announcing my connection to such a notorious House might make things worse. Not wanting to cause any problems for my mother and younger brother - and also not wanting to see House Wilkes subjugated to House Potter - I kept quiet about it. Happily, now that I'm not a part of House Potter anymore, my status as Lord Wilkes won't reflect on your house at all."

He gave a casual shrug. "Like I said the other night - everybody wins."

"*Lord Wilkes*?!" This time, it was Tiberius Nott's turn to scoff. "A 13-year-old Lord of the Wizengamot?! Absurd! He hasn't taken a single OWL yet!"

"Chief Warlock," said Lord Greengrass, rising to his feet. "I rise to a point of order. Two actually. First, there's been a lot of shouting going on today. The outbursts from the Lords Potter and Nott should be stricken for speaking out of turn and without recognition."

"Your first point is sustained," said the Chief Warlock. "Lord Potter and Lord Nott are admonished against both outbursts and speaking without being recognized. And your second point, Lord Greengrass?"

"Merely that Lord Nott displays historical ignorance. Although it has fallen out of favor mainly due to longer lifespans among wizarding kind and less internecine violence in the modern era, many of the older House charters contemplate individuals claiming Lordships as young as 11 when a prior Lord dies unexpectedly without having named an adult as Heir. Indeed, my own House's charter permits the accession of a Lord or Lady as young as 13 if no adult claimant can be found. Furthermore, the Wizengamot's own charter permits the claiming of an ancestral seat as young as 14. It is also *completely silent* on the subject of how many OWLs a Lord needs to claim his seat, understandably so since the Wizengamot charter predates the OWL and NEWT testing regime by centuries!"

"Lord Greengrass is, of course, correct," said Harry. "There is a requirement that an underage and orphaned child of a Noble House must pass a certain number of OWLs to be considered a true wizard or witch and thus be eligible to claim Lord Conditional status. That requirement is irrelevant where a wizard is already a legal adult due to emancipation. I had actually planned on taking my OWLs this next summer so that I could petition for emancipation, but Lord Potter's kind gesture made that unnecessary."

Behind him, James was turning a vivid purple but as he was acutely aware of how many feet away his boss was sitting, he managed to restrain his temper. Harry continued.

"Which leads me to another matter. Although I legally hold the title Lord Wilkes, I am technically not eligible to claim the Wilkes Seat because my 14th birthday isn't until July. Luckily, as Madam Jones stated earlier in reference to my godfather, Lord Black, the Inheritance Act addresses that issue. Being underage is specifically listed as a Special Circumstance justifying a delay in taking the Oath of Unity. Accordingly, I hereby claim the Wilkes Seat effective immediately, with my solicitor Artemus Podmore to serve as my Proxy. I will be taking my Vow of Unity at the August session, but I am paying my family's Wizengamot dues today."

And sure enough, the Court Reporter revealed in a stunned voice that the sum of *100,000 galleons* had been deposited on behalf of House Wilkes.

"BUT HE'S THIRTEEN!" Lord Nott bellowed again.

Dumbledore banged his gavel. "Lord Nott, you have been warned about speaking out of turn. Any further outbursts will be met with monetary sanctions!"

While Nott fumed, Lucius rose. "Notwithstanding the impropriety of Lord Nott's outburst, House Malfoy rises to respond to his fundamental point. The boy in question is a 13-year-old *adult*. This is so because his father emancipated him and *no one* in this chamber objected. We cannot complain after the fact if a 13-year-old adult does something that any other adult in his situation would be free to do."



Then, Lucius turned to Nott with a contemptuous expression. "Honestly, Nott, if you're so upset at someone making legal use of the Special Circumstances provision, perhaps we should take another look at the Inheritance Act as a whole. Based on past events, it's obviously *ripe* for abuse. But regardless, it *is* the law of the land, and it is binding on this body – *as I'm sure you realize given your research into its more arcane points!*"

Harry smirked at that, while Dumbledore banged his gavel before Lord Nott snapped and began hexing Lord Malfoy, which was a disappointment to Harry who really wanted to see the man stripped of his seat for public violence.

"Enough!" the Chief Warlock exclaimed. "Lord Malfoy is correct. So long as Mr. Black has obtained the Wilkes Lordship by lawful exercise of the Wilkes Charter, then this body cannot challenge his right to it. And so long as he is lawfully Lord Wilkes, has paid his dues, and can take his Vow of Unity within six months, this body cannot challenge his right to the Wilkes Seat either, regardless of his age. Those matters are closed to further discussion."

He turned back to Harry. "Now, Lord Wilkes. Is there any *more* business which you wish to bring before the Wizengamot?"

By his tone, Harry assumed Dumbledore desperately wanted him to say no, but unfortunately, he had two matters left to discuss.

"Just two brief announcements, Chief Warlock," Harry said. "First, I wish to give notice that any outstanding but unexecuted contracts between House Wilkes and any other parties that were negotiated on behalf of House Wilkes by Lord Goyle during the interregnum will be held in abeyance

pending review by my solicitors and advisors. The other parties to any such contracts will be informed in due course as to whether those contracts will be reaffirmed ... or voided."

Harry turned to look *right at* Tiberius Nott for that last remark, his way of announcing that a certain marriage contract would *definitely* be voided.

"And finally, while House Wilkes is deeply grateful to House Goyle for looking after my cousin Amaryllis for the past twelve years, I would like to have the chance to get to know her better. To be honest, I rather like the idea of having a sister. And so, I hereby announce that House Goyle's guardianship of Amaryllis Wilkes is terminated. Starting this summer, she will be staying with me as a guest of House Longbottom. Assuming this is agreeable to the Longbottom Regent. Lady Longbottom?"

"Most certainly, Lord Wilkes," Augusta replied magnanimously. Elsewhere, Lord Goyle was fuming, but his anger soon turned to fear as he wondered how this would affect his relationship with House Nott.

The crowd continued to murmur. Most of the mutterings came from those who were agitated over both the infamous House of Wilkes returning to power and the propriety of two *children* now holding Wizengamot seats. But there were also urgent whispers among those who noted that the new Lord Wilkes clearly had the support of the Ancient and Noble Houses of Black, Greengrass, Longbottom, and Malfoy, and probably the Noble House of Prince. And then, with some alarm, they started doing the math on how many votes their alliance could command.

Meanwhile, Harry turned back to the Chief Warlock.

"That concludes my business before the Wizengamot, Chief Warlock. I thank you for your kind indulgence."

With that, Hadrian Remus Black, Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of Wilkes, turned and made his way to claim his ancestral box and the chair that had just materialized in it. Artie had already moved to join him there and bowed to him respectfully before proudly shaking the boy's hand while the Chief Warlock struggled to restore order so that he could finally close the session.

"Congratulations, my Lord Wilkes," Artie said deferentially.

Harry nodded before taking his seat. "Just promise me I don't have to say '*Hadrian*' again today," he quipped. "That's getting *really* annoying."

## Chapter End Notes

Next: Potter and Black. Together again. Uh-oh.

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my Patreon page and supported my original fiction.

Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2 (What the Sinister Man is reading): Nothing new, I'm afraid.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors:

A\$APkamal, Adam Sitrich, aliceop, Arcane, BlueWater5, Chrys, Crookshanks, darkphoenix31, FeatheryMinx,

Flareix\_ [Prince Flare], Gabe, hol, jobber, kami, Krisni,  
Ladyshjwblack, Magica, nh1, onlyonesane,  
Pivosh(Knight of Ron aka Reg), PK, PrettyPinkCupcake,  
scallionpancake, SE, Sielk, SlytherinCrown,  
SwordOfRome, TNT, and TzarDeRus. Thanks, guys!  
AN4: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 13,758. Followers:  
14,603. Favorites: 12,788. Communities: 217. Go Team  
POS!

# Potters and Blacks

## Chapter Notes

### SHAMELESS PLUG!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything. We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### ***Harry Potter and the Death Eater Menace***

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***Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.***

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### ***Chapter 49: Blacks and Potters***

#### ***Meanwhile in Minister Fudge's Office ...***

As the Chief Warlock finally banged his gavel to close the Special Session of the Wizengamot, Sirius Black leaned back in his chair up in Minister Fudge's office. In the office with him were Senior Undersecretary Dolores Umbridge, Healer Ted Tonks, and Kingsley Shacklebolt. Sirius

remembered Shacklebolt from his school and Auror Academy days, but Umbridge was new to him.

"Bloody hell," Sirius Black said in amazement as he listened over the Wizing Wireless to Harry's shocking announcement. Actually, his *three* shocking announcements: his emancipation, his self-expulsion from House Potter, and his wholly unexpected claim of the youngest Lordship in Merlin knew how long. Umbridge was equally surprised by the sequence of events, but Shacklebolt was more amused by the outcome rather than simply astonished.

"Good for you, kid," he said under his breath at Harry's announcement. Sirius's keen hearing heard him, though.

"Do you know Harry?" Black asked.

"A little," Kingsley answered. "And only ... in a professional capacity." Then, he suddenly grimaced in embarrassment. "I was the bonder for the Unbreakable Vow between Harry and James that led to today's events."

Sirius stared at the man in shock, and even Umbridge was amazed.

"A 13-year-old?" she exclaimed. "Made to swear an Unbreakable Vow? What were the terms if I may ask?"

Shacklebolt shrugged. "I suppose I can reveal most of it, or at least the bits of it that just got executed in front of the whole country on the Wizing Wireless. James swore a Vow to emancipate Harry, and Harry swore a Vow to leave House Potter immediately afterwards. There were some other terms, but those have *not* been discussed publicly yet, so I don't feel right about sharing them."

"Did one of them involve James speaking up on my behalf?" Sirius asked quietly.

Shacklebolt looked pensive. "There were terms they'd verbally agreed to before I arrived that were ratified by the Vow. That might have been one of them, but I don't really know."

Then, the Auror smiled. "But hey, I'm pretty sure that Harry has taken care of all *his* obligations, so the Vow's no threat to him anymore. And now that he's in *your* family instead of House Potter, I suspect he'll be much happier."

Sirius looked away, while Ted spoke reassuringly. "Indeed, Sirius, I'm sure he'll have a better father-figure with you than with his birth father."

With that, Sirius's mood lifted, and he let out a sudden laugh. "Heh! My godson, a Lord of the Wizengamot at 13! He must be the youngest Lord ever!"

"Oh no," Dolores said while reaching for another biscuit. "Before the Inheritance Act set the minimum age at 14, there were several Lords and Ladies who claimed their ancestral seats as young as 12. But your godson is *definitely* the youngest Wizengamot Lord since 1643."

The three men looked at her in surprise.

"I'm a historian," she said airily. "We live for trivia like that."

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### ***The Wizengamot Chamber***

Once the Wizengamot session had officially ended, Harry and Artie swiftly made their way out of the Chamber, pausing only long enough to congratulate Justin and his

new guardian and regent. Harry glanced back and saw both Jim and Lily heading his way (with James on an intercept course for his wife and remaining son), but he decided he did *not* want to have that discussion in such a public place. According to Artie, as a Lord of the Wizengamot, Harry was entitled to a private office on this level, and the boy decided that would be a good place to regroup.

Nearby, Lily was in pursuit of her wayward son when James stepped in front of her.

"Did you know?" he asked angrily. "That you were descended from House Wilkes?"

"Not now, James," Lily responded just as testily.

"I'll take that as a *yes*," he growled. Beside them, Jim rolled his eyes at yet another sign of how dysfunctional his family turned out to be. With neither of his parents looking at him, he took the opportunity to slip away and go after Harry. Lily attempted to follow, but James grabbed her by the arm. She glared at him.

"You can remove your hand, James," she said in a low voice, "or you can lose it."

"Fine," he said as he let go, "but dammit, answer me! How long have you known?"

Lily sighed and then threw up a quick privacy charm.

"Since the summer of 1973, if I remember right. I thought I might be able to trace my ancestry back to a wizarding family. And I did. But once I found out *which* wizarding family I was descended from, I burned all my genealogy notes and resolved never to think on it again. Even then, I'd



already heard enough rumors about Erasmus Wilkes to know that a newly discovered Muggleborn relative of his would probably meet a *hilariously tragic* end. And that was *before* anyone even knew for sure he was a Death Eater."

"But still," James said, shaking his head in disbelief. "You knew! The whole time we were dating! The whole time we were married! How could you keep this from me?!"

She lifted her chin defiantly. "To be honest, James? I wanted to tell you right after we started dating. But *your mother* talked me out of it!"

James stepped back as if he'd been slapped, and Lily strode past him without another word. He watched her go and wondered just what else his wife and his mother had schemed behind his back all those years ago.

Neither of them noticed the tiny insect that sat hidden beneath the collar of James's Auror coat.

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***Summerisles***  
***25 July 1976***  
***(The Summer Before Lily's Sixth Year)***

*The young Muggleborn girl sat nervously at her table waiting for her "luncheon companion." Although she was in her best dress, she was acutely aware of how her Muggle attire made her stick out against the wealthy magicals in the restaurant in their fine robes and elaborate pointy hats. None of them appeared to pay her any mind, but she assumed at least some of them were whispering "Mudblood" under their breath. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, a figure moved past her and slid into the chair opposite.*

*"I do apologize for my tardiness, my dear," the other woman said. "But thank you so much for coming. I've been looking forward to meeting with you."*

*Lily tried to smile but it faltered on her lips. "Your invitation was most ... insistent, your Ladyship. Not to be rude, but why exactly have you been looking forward to meeting me?" As if the girl didn't already have a general idea. Something to do with the Toe-Rag.*

*"Please, Lily," said Lady Potter almost earnestly. "Call me Dorea. After all, I'm hopeful that you and I will become great friends."*

"And perhaps, Lady Potter, someday we will," Lily replied with brittle politeness. "Who knows what the future holds, after all? But for the moment, I think perhaps I shouldn't be so presumptuous as to call you by your first name. Given my blood status, I wouldn't want people to think I had ideas above my station."

Dorea's eyes glittered, and a malicious grin spread across her face. "My goodness! It's been a long time since someone spoke to me with such an elegant combination of civility and disdain. I think I like you already."

By that point, a snooty waiter showed up with two menus, which Lily was dismayed to see were written entirely in French. Seizing on the only things that looked familiar, she ordered Quiche Almondine with a side salad and water, while Dorea slipped into fluent French and ordered God only knew what. The waiter took the menus and departed.

"I understand that you have questions, my dear," the older witch said. "But let us eat companionably first and then turn to weightier issues later, shall we?"

Lily nodded, and for the next forty-five minutes, the two ate together and engaged in polite small talk that the Muggleborn (and a lower class Muggleborn, at that) nevertheless found excruciating in the presence of such a grande dame of Wizarding society. Dorea inquired about Lily's classes, and the girl replied that Charms and Potions were her best subjects. Dorea, who was a semi-retired St Mungo's Healer with a specialty in experimental Potions, then asked her several insightful questions, some of which were over her head despite her academic success. Lily was on the verge of feeling insecure about her best subject when Dorea casually asked if she were getting a Mastery in Potions, Charms, or both, since Lily was clearly qualified in Dorea's estimation.

Lily had questions as well, mainly about the likelihood of a Muggleborn becoming a Healer and getting a job at St Mungo's. Dorea was candid. With Lily's grades, getting a Mastery in Healing Magic was certainly possible, as was eventually getting a job at the nation's only real magical hospital. However, institutional bias against Muggleborns was present in St Mungo's as it was everywhere else, and Lily would have to be five times better than her Pureblood peers to be considered half as good.

"Does that seem fair to you, Lady Potter?" Lily asked with deceptive mildness. By that point, they'd finished lunch and had moved on to Summerisle's legendary dessert cart. Lily ordered the tiramisu, while Dorea had the raspberry crème brulee and Turkish coffee.

"No," she answered, "but it's not a fair world. My personal belief is that blood matters, but ability and ambition matter far more. Of course, that heresy nearly led to my being struck from the Black family tree, a fate my great-nephew

Sirius has already suffered. Which, of course, is why he now lives with my family instead of his own."

She gave Lily a curious expression. "Can I assume your opinion of Sirius Black is as poor as it is of my son, James?"

Lily stiffened. "I don't approve of bullies," she said without elaboration.

Dorea nodded. "A sentiment I applaud. That said, one must make allowances for ... an unfortunate upbringing."

"Whatever Sirius Black's upbringing was like," Lily said coolly, "it cannot justify the way he treats other people."

"I would never attempt to justify whatever my nephew has done to offend you, Lily. But it was not Sirius's fault that he was raised without any notion of how people with compassion or empathy should act around one another. Quite the contrary, he was raised by people who most likely tried to beat those traits out of him at an early age."

Lily hesitated. "Sirius was ... abused by his family?"

Dorea's lips pursed together. "I'll put it to you this way, my dear. How old were you when you learned the Charm to detect poisons?"

She furrowed her brow in confusion at the question. "I've never learned that Charm. Never thought I'd need to."

"Well, Sirius did need to. And so, I discreetly taught it to him over the Christmas holidays of his First Year at Hogwarts. Both his parents and several of his aunts and uncles find dangerous potions mixed in with morning breakfast or afternoon tea to be both an excellent disciplinary tactic and an amusing pastime."

Lily was shocked but quickly shook it off. "Well, as ... horrible as that is, Lady Potter, I really don't think you invited me here out of a desire to make me more sympathetic to Sirius Black, although I suppose it's good that he's now living with your family. But ... can we just cut to the chase, Lady Potter? Why are we here?"

Dorea sniffed in amusement. "Cut to the chase? I assume that's a Muggle idiom, but I can guess what it means. Very well. Cut to the chase, we shall."

She reached into her purse and removed what looked like a Muggle stopwatch made of silver and covered with runes. She twisted one of the knobs several times and then pulled out a second knob before placing the watch on the table. Instantly, all the conversational noise of the restaurant faded away as if everyone around them speaking was now whispering instead and doing so from far away and in a foreign tongue.

"There we are. Just a little precaution, my dear. We have some sensitive matters to discuss, and that will ensure no one else can listen in." Dorea leaned her arms on the table with her fingers laced as she regarded the Muggleborn.

"But first ... I'd like to hear from you what reasons *you* think I have for inviting you here today."

Lily narrowed her eyes. "Why?"

"Because I want to, as you say, *cut to the chase*. I think it will probably speed things along a bit if I can allay your suspicions of my motives. But first, I need to know what those suspicions are. Feel free to be as blunt as you like. I assure you, nothing you say will offend me. I'm both a Slytherin and a Black, after all."

The girl stared at Dorea intently as if trying to judge her intentions.

"Fine. Two reasons occur to me. One is that you've heard rumors of your son's *obsessive* interest in me, and you wanted to meet with me because you think I'm a gold-digger. You asked me here to threaten me or bribe me or otherwise ward me off from James in some manner. And even though I have zero interest in your son, you're far too doting a mother to accept that any girl's head couldn't be turned by his ... *Potter charm*."

Dorea smiled and took a sip of her coffee.

"And the other reason?"

"That you've heard rumors of your son's interest in me, and since your son is the most monumentally spoiled and over-indulged person I've ever met in my entire life, you're actually going to the trouble to speak to a schoolgirl on your son's behalf in the hopes that, I don't know, I'll date him or something. Or at least stop hexing him and calling him a toe-rag."

The girl huffed slightly. "To be honest, Lady Potter, I'm not sure which of those two possibilities I find more offensive. Unless you really do go to the extreme of trying to bribe or blackmail me into dating your son. I'm pretty sure *that* would tip the scales in one direction."

"Well then, I shall endeavor to not give any further offense. As to your first theory, let me reassure you that I do not consider you a gold digger, nor do I have any animus against you for being a Muggleborn. As I said, blood matters, but ability matters more. I have made inquiries about you, Lily, and everyone I've spoken to says you are extraordinarily gifted. Brilliant even. If you choose to

pursue any sort of relationship with my son, you will have my full blessing."

"As to your *second* theory." She hesitated. "I admit James is spoiled. Terribly so. I was 46 when I gave birth to him, and that was after three miscarriages. I was on the verge of asking for a divorce so that Charlus could remarry someone younger who could give him a child to carry on the family name when I finally conceived James. But while James is spoiled, *I* never spoiled him. That was all Charlus's doing. *My* mistake was in *letting* him do so. After James was born, I was ... distant from him. I held myself aloof as his mother and played as little a role in his upbringing as I could. In retrospect, that was probably a mistake. But at the time, I felt I had to, you see."

Lily looked at her in confusion. "Why would you think that?"

Dorea sighed deeply. "I was afraid, Lily. Afraid that if I played too strong a role in raising James, that he would become ... *like me*. That he would become too cynical. Too pragmatic. Too ambitious. Too ... Slytherin."

"You say that like those are bad things," the girl said.

"They're not ... most of the time. But believe me, Lily. If James had been *anything like me* when he went under the Sorting Hat, the results could have been disastrous. And not just for James or for House Potter. More than that, I cannot say ... for now, at least.

"That said, while I am not here to win your favor as some sort of trophy girlfriend for my spoiled and impetuous son, I am interested in seeing whether you might truly be a match for him, and if so, to try and persuade you to at least consider it. And frankly, based on what I've learned so far

about you, I think you may be just what both James and House Potter need."

Lily stared at the older witch in amazement. "I'm a Muggleborn, Lady Potter. And an outspoken one, I'm told. Meanwhile, House Potter is Ancient and Noble and filthy rich to boot. In what *universe* can I possibly be what your house *needs*?! Why would you possibly think that just because James has a creepily obsessive schoolboy crush on me?"

Dorea signed in resignation. "Because I'm afraid ... that it's a bit more than a schoolboy crush, Lily."

"... Okay. So what is it?"

"Would you laugh at me if I told you it was ... *a soul bond*?"

Lily Evans stared at the witch before doing just that. For almost ten seconds, she laughed deliriously at Dorea's explanation while the other witch waited patiently.

"A *soul bond*!" the girl exclaimed when she finally caught her breath. "That's ... that's absolute *nonsense*! A cheesy plot device to explain why wizards and witches with nothing in common end up together in the awful romance novels that the girls in my dorm read! And anyway, how can it be a soul bond when I'm definitely *not* in love with James?"

Dorea chuckled as well, though without mirth. "It's nothing like those silly books, I'm happy to say. And I don't know if soul bond is the right term or not, but it's a useful placeholder for this discussion."

She paused to have a sip of coffee as if girding herself for what came next.



"I shall explain it to you as my mother-in-law, Euphemia Potter, explained it to me. As it was explained to *her* by her own mother-in-law, Sarah-Jane Potter, the wife of Lord Henry Potter, and to whom it was presumably explained the same way on back through innumerable generations. At some point in the past, about 200 years or so ago, a former Lord of House Potter, presumably one who regretted his marital choices, did ... *something*. I've no idea what, but it was powerful magic and almost certainly *highly illegal* magic. Regardless, the spell he cast essentially acted as a curse on the Potter line designed to eliminate the possibility of bad marriages to unworthy witches. It operates by ensuring that each Potter male would be drawn to the ideal marriage prospect – whatever Fate decided that meant in each successive generation – at which point he would ... well, fall hopelessly in love with her."

Lily stared at her. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!" she finally said.

"I quite agree to be honest," Dorea replied while toying idly with the remains of her crème brûlée. "I was just as appalled as you when Euphemia told me that. Really, to learn that anyone would go to such foolish extremes! No offense, my dear, but *only* a Gryffindor could have come up with an idea like that!"

"Offense taken," Lily replied tartly. "So, out of some preposterous scheme to make sure his heirs ... married well, a former Lord Potter cursed all his descendants to fall in love with '*the perfect marriage prospect*,' which in this case means that your son James has fallen head over heels for a Muggleborn from a poor family who can't stand to be in the same room with him. Does James know about this alleged curse he's under?"

"No," said Dorea firmly. "I decided that it should be kept from him. Euphemia and Fleamont Potter made the mistake of telling Charlus before he started Hogwarts, and he was so incensed that Fate had chosen a Slytherin of the House of Black for him that we were at each other's throats the whole time we were at school together. I never even knew the reason for his hostility and just assumed it was just Gyffindor-Slytherin rivalry carried to absurd extremes. It wasn't until years later, after we were both in our residencies at St Mungo's and forced to work long hours together, that he finally broke down and admitted the truth: that he had loved me from the moment he laid eyes on me but also hated the fact that Fate had chosen me for him and deprived him of any choice in the matter.

"It was not long afterwards that Euphemia met with me and we had a talk very similar to the one you and I are having right now, though I was nearly 30 at the time instead of a schoolgirl. We came to terms - which, I might add, were *very* favorable to me - and I married Charlus four months later. That was how long it took for me to really study him and make sure that he would be a suitable marriage prospect."

Lily lifted her chin. "So that was it. Magic picked you for Charlus, and you just went along with it. Love never came into it at all."

"My goodness, Lily, how sentimental you are. I came to love Charlus very much, thank you, and I love him still. As annoying as I found him when we were at school, he turned out to have a great many positive and desirable qualities and simply needed someone to help him cultivate them while also encouraging him to suppress those traits that were offensive. Similarly, while James has a veritable host of character flaws, there *is* goodness in him, if only the right

person can bring it forth. Of course, marrying a flawed man in the hopes that you can change him for the better is *usually* a recipe for disaster, but it works out surprisingly well when the flawed man in question is besotted with you and will do whatever it takes to win your affection. It did not take long for Charlus Potter to go from a man I was happy to hex in the back to someone I truly loved as a wife should love her husband. And I believe that you are just as capable of effecting such a change in James."

The young Muggleborn shook her head at what she was hearing. "No, I'm sorry. I couldn't do that. I could never marry someone who was *under a spell* that made him love me while knowing the whole time that it wasn't real!"

Dorea scoffed. "Oh honestly, child! What is *real love*? You young people today have no idea about such things, constantly muddling love with mere desire. Or worse, *lust*. From a magical perspective, the messy, sordid tangle of emotions that *you* call love is nothing but a rush of hormones altering brain chemistry, a result biologically no different than that caused by eating large quantities of chocolate. *Real love* comes from accepting someone else both at their best and at their worst so completely that their absence from your life becomes unthinkable. Such bonds are the product of years of intimacy in every form, whether sexual passion or furious arguments or raising a child together or simply holding hands at sunset. Real love doesn't end with a wedding, my dear. It *starts* there."

She paused to take another sip of coffee before continuing. "Of course, if that's too much trouble and you insist on *real love* of the sort that poets and bards always gad on about, there's always Amortentia."

Lily gasped. "That's *illegal*!" The older witch simply laughed.

"Not with disclosure and mutuality, my dear. Amortentia is perfectly legal and quite common in arranged marriages among Purebloods. It's usually taken by both husband and wife as part of the wedding ceremony to provide a few weeks of true connubial bliss over the honeymoon and help both spouses get over their jitters. But it's not unusual for some couples to continue taking it for the rest of their lives rather than run the risk of letting its effects fade and learning that a legal ceremony and a potion were the only things they had in common. But no, only when Amortentia is forced on someone without consent is it illegal. If your preference is for James to become Prince Charming and carry you off as his princess to live happily ever after, we can just make regular Amortentia doses for you both a part of the marriage contract. A pleasurable means to a measurable end, so to speak."

Lily stared at the woman as she absorbed everything she'd said. "I will *never* consent to Amortentia," she declared firmly. Dorea returned her gaze impassively before breaking out into a warm smile of her own.

"Good for you. I refused to take it as well. A true Slytherin is always clear-eyed, even in matters of love and matrimony."

"GAAAH!" Lily snarled. "You are getting way ahead of yourself. I don't know if I buy *any* of this, but I still don't want to even *date* James, let alone marry him. Honestly, Lady Potter, your son is not the only fish in the Hogwarts Sea!"

"True, but frankly, he is the finest catch you're likely to land. You are both brilliant and *ambitious*, Lily Evans. Far too

brilliant and ambitious to strive for a Mastery only to settle for being a mere Mediwitch rather than a Healer. Or worse, to end up working in a shop or as a junior clerk in some minor Ministry department. Unfortunately, I'm sorry to say that as a Muggleborn, even one as gifted as you, reaching the heights you desire and deserve will be a herculean task. And your career prospects will only worsen if you marry a fellow Muggleborn or a Muggle unless you plan to leave the wizarding world altogether. Of course, marrying a Pureblood or a Halfblood from a good family would help, but then you face the daunting challenge of landing such a beau despite your lineage."

Lily grew angry at Dorea's remarks. "I know things are probably different in *Slytherin*, Lady Potter, but I know plenty of boys in the other three Houses who are not so bigoted against me for being Muggleborn!"

Dorea took another sip of coffee. "I said lineage, Lily, not blood status. And you should know that a wizarding family of any prominence will want to see your family tree before they agree to any sort of commitment."

The girl's anger melted away, and she grew pale. "What about my family tree?" she said in a quiet but intense voice.

"Let's not be coy, my dear," Dorea answered. "For future reference, you should know that the goblins of Gringotts do not consider any information they obtain on behalf of a wizard or witch to be confidential unless they're specifically paid for it, a fact they don't even bother to advertise to Muggleborns like yourself. When I knew you were the one Fate had chosen for James, I made inquiries, and a Gringotts representative contacted me and offered for a dear price a copy of the genealogical research you commissioned from them a few years back."

Dorea leaned forward. "So forgive me for being blunt, Lily, but *no* wizard in this country is going to marry a Muggleborn who is the only living blood relative of Erasmus Wilkes, one of the most powerful members of the Wizengamot and also one of the most reactionary blood purists in the nation."

Lily looked away for a moment. "I see. So, I guess we've come to the *blackmail* portion of the conversation."

Dorea chuckled. "I am pleased to see that you *can* think like a Slytherin. But no, I have no intention of using this knowledge to coerce you into a relationship with my son. Indeed, I have already paid the fees that Gringotts requires for destroying all records of your genealogy, including Obliviating the goblin who ran the search for you. Someone would need actual copies of your family's records from the Muggle authorities to trace your ancestry now, and no Pureblood would ever be able to get that without your family's assistance.

"If you are dead set against a relationship with James, I will ask you for mutual secrecy oaths. I will not reveal your Wilkes connection and you will not repeat anything I've told you today. And that will be the end of it. But I can assure you, if you ever consider matrimony with any other boy who was raised in the magical world, that connection will almost certainly come out and to your detriment. And the list of potential suitors who would be willing to court *death* as the price of courting *you* is very small indeed."

Lily sat with her head bowed for several minutes as she fought to control herself. She'd dabbled with Occlumency when she was still friends with Sev, and while she'd never progressed as far as he had, she was good enough to

neither break down and cry in response to the older woman's words nor to rage at her instead.

It was a close thing though.

"What do you want from me?" she finally said.

"Not as much as you fear, my child," Dorea answered. "All I want is for you to give James a chance. You find his bullying and pranks offensive? Tell him so. Tell him and make him understand that if he wants you to give him the time of day, he will change his ways. Are you offended that someone so clearly talented is lazy in his schoolwork? Demand that he maintain good grades as a condition of dating you. I cannot guarantee that you'll be able to mold James Potter into the man of your dreams. I ask only that you *try*."

Lily narrowed her eyes. "You're ... inviting me to whip your son into shape? Because his father spoiled him while you stood by and let him do it? Seriously?"

Dorea nodded sadly. "There is more you should know. And will know if, as I hope, you decide that James is marriageable. There are *vitaly important* things you will *both* need to know. But Charlus has decided to spare James the burdens that House Potter imposes on its men until he turns 21. My husband wants his Heir to reach full adulthood and to complete a mastery or whatever sort of post-Hogwarts training James desires before saddling him with ... well, with everything that being a future Lord Potter entails. And while I hold influence over Charlus in many areas, where House matters are concerned, I am constrained not to reveal anything about such matters to you or to whoever becomes his future bride until he deems James prepared. I can only say that James, like his father, needs someone to guide him. Someone to stand beside him.

And if necessary, someone to whack him upside the head when he's acting a fool. Possibly several times. You strike me as the sort of person who can do that for my James."

Despite herself, Lily laughed. "Lady Potter ... Dorea. Even if what you say is true, a Muggleborn like me is never going to be able to exert that sort of power over the Heir to an Ancient and Noble House, let alone its Lord. And ... I'm sorry, but from what I know about James Potter, I just don't know if I trust him to ... to do right by me."

Dorea smirked and then reached into her handbag to pull out a scroll. "Take this home and read over it. It's my marriage contract with Charlus. Pay special attention to Clauses 4, 7, 16, and 19. I will not waste time summarizing them now. You can read for yourself, and I'm sure you're clever enough to understand them. But suffice it to say that Charlus Potter could never raise a hand to me even if he were inclined to do so. He could never cheat on me. He could never try to divorce me. But at any time I so choose, I can leave him and take a sizeable portion of his wealth with me when I go. Though I've never had the desire to, I could even take a lover myself so long as I ensured there was no possibility of siring a bastard. And if I ever had true grounds to divorce Charlus *for cause* as defined by that contract, I could claim most of what he has. Should things progress satisfactorily between you and my son, feel free to adapt those provisions into your own marriage contract along with any other protections you feel are necessary."

Lily's eyes narrowed. "You know, it almost sounds like you're more on my side than on your son's."

"I'm on both your sides, my dear. But in this instance, being on James's side means making sure he has a Lady Potter who is worthy of the name."



The girl nodded and took the contract. "So, will you tell James about House Wilkes or should I?"

Dorea scoffed. "Oh, I'm sure we'll find the right time to let him in on that secret."

She paused to finish her coffee. "While he's on his deathbed perhaps?"

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### ***1 September 1976*** ***Platform 9 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>***

James Potter had just hugged his mother and father and was about to board the Hogwarts Express with Sirius Black by his side when Lily Evans marched right up to confront him.

"Evans!" he said excitedly. "Good to see you! How was your sum-...?"

"No pranks," she said interrupting him.

"Um, what?"

"I said *no pranks*. No hexing anyone in the halls for a laugh. No picking fights with Slytherins just because they exist. None of your usual attempts at juvenile humor. You don't lose Gryffindor any House points. You don't get any detentions. You act like you're actually a year away from being a goddamned adult."

She took a step forward. "You do that from now until the first Hogsmeade weekend, and I'll go on a date with you."

James's eyes lit up in excitement. "Are you serious?"

"No," Lily said with a sparkle in her own eyes as she pointed to a confused Black. "That would be this idiot."

With that, she turned and walked away, leaving an utterly poleaxed James Potter behind.

Thirty feet away, Dorea Potter watched the exchange with victorious pride.

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***5 November 1976***  
***The Gryffindor Common Room***  
***(After "The Prank")***

Lily sat alone by the fire reviewing her Herbology notes when James entered the Common Room. She glanced at her watch.

"It's ten minutes past curfew, Potter. I hope nobody saw you and docked us any points for whatever mischief you've been up to."

James didn't answer except to give a loud sniff. Lily studied him and noticed that the normally unflappable Gryffindor was genuinely distraught.

"Wait, Potter," she said while rising from her chair. "What is it? What's happened?"

"It ... it's nothing, Evans," he mumbled. "I didn't lose any points. It's ... it's fine."

That was an obvious lie, as the young man looked like he was on the verge of a breakdown. Lily came over to him.

"It's not fine, whatever *it* is, Potter. Now sit down and tell me what's happened!"

With that, Lily pulled James down to sit beside her on a nearby loveseat. He wiped his face with his hand.

"I'm ... sorry," he said almost babbling. "Really, I am. I should have gotten there faster."

"Gotten where, Potter?"

He looked down at the floor with a beaten expression. "Sirius ... I don't know what he was thinking, I swear it. Whether it was a stupid prank that went out of control or what. But he sent Sniv ... I mean, he sent your friend Snape..."

Her eyes narrowed. "Sent him where? Is Severus okay?"

James nodded. "I think so. He's in the Hospital Wing, but I don't think he's hurt physically. We'll see tomorrow, I guess. I ... I can't tell you most of it. Dumbledore wants it hushed up or else ... well, an innocent student will be in terrible trouble if the whole truth gets out. But Sirius sent Snape into a dangerous situation. When I found out, I tried to get there in time to save him. And I *did*. I kept Snape from getting killed or even hurt. But it was such a close thing. Another few seconds and he'd have been ...."

At that point, his face crumpled, and he began to weep. "You were right about me, Evans. This whole time, you were right."

"How so?"

"I'm a bully and an arse and ... and even a toe-rag. Honestly, I'm not even sure what that last one means, but I reckon it fits. I tried to change, you know, for you. But now ... I see it. I'm a stupid, arrogant berk and I don't deserve you but I'm so sorry even though I know you'll never forgive ..."

As the normally overconfident James Potter broke down and babbled his apologies, Lily was surprised to find herself moved by his sudden vulnerability. She was equally surprised to realize that for the past two months, Potter had been surprisingly ... not awful. And that's when the strangest impulse seized her. Without really thinking about it, Lily leaned in and kissed James on the lips. It was a brief kiss, but it was their first one. Then, she leaned back and smiled, oddly amused to notice that his face was suddenly quite flushed.

"What ... what was that for?" he asked weakly.

"I'm not entirely sure. For the time being, let's just say it was to stop you babbling before you hyperventilated and passed out." The words were sarcastic, as was typical for Lily when she spoke to Potter, but the delivery was more gentle than usual.

"Now then," she began. "This prank you can't talk about. Did you play any role in planning it? Or executing it?" He shook his head no to both questions. "And you tried to stop it before anyone got hurt?" He nodded. "And you did save Severus Snape, your old enemy and rival, from getting hurt?" Another nod.

She paused to stare deeply into his eyes. "So *why* did you rush to save Snape after all your years of animosity towards him?"

James's brow furrowed as if he were confused by the question. "Because it was the right thing to do!" he exclaimed as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "I mean, I may *hate* the greasy git with all my heart, but I don't want to see him get killed!"

"Well okay then," Lily continued. "In that case, I guess this doesn't count against you. Assuming you can make it one more week, we're both still on for Hogsmeade."

She patted the astonished boy on the knee before rising to head up to her dorm room. "Good night, Potter."

"Lily!" he cried out suddenly. She turned back to him. "Could ... could you call me *James*? Please?"

She seemed to study him for a moment. Then, she smiled. "Just this once. Good night ... James."

Then, she left the room and headed up to bed, wondering the whole time what the odd fluttery feeling in her stomach meant.

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### ***The Wizengamot Chamber*** ***(Now)***

James moved to follow Lily, but he was intercepted by Minister Fudge.

"Not to intrude on family matters, James, but judging by your expression and that of Lily, I don't think you want to continue whatever discussion just ended in such a public place."

"Minister ..."

"And speaking of discussions," Fudge said while moving in a little closer, "I would like to *discuss* with you what just happened. I would very much like an explanation of why I only heard about your former Heir's plan to reactivate and claim *the Toymaker's House Seat* when it happened in front

of me during a session that was being broadcast to the whole nation!"

James gulped. "I assure you, Cornelius. It was ... as much a surprise to me as it was to you."

"Yes, I suppose that much was obvious from your demeanor, my boy. Still, I should like very much to hear what you *did* know and what inferences we can draw from your ... well, from Lord Wilkes's bold move. As a result of today's shenanigans, there are now *fifteen extra votes* in play in all future voting sessions that are in the hands of people who I know nothing about. People whose political goals are a mystery to me. Not to mention the ten votes that Lord Black has reclaimed from you, a former friend against whom he might well hold a grudge."

Fudge's face hardened. "I'm sure you understand why the political ramifications of that might take priority over a potentially embarrassing - and public - marital squabble. Am I right?"

James nodded glumly.

"And besides," the Minister continued more genially, "you said that you hoped Sirius Black would forgive you for what happened between you back in 1981. Well, right now, he's up in my office! Perhaps now might be a time to make that apology and see if your former friendship can be salvaged, what?"

James glanced over the Minister's shoulder at the rapidly retreating form of his wife before nodding again. "Very well, Minister. Perhaps you're right."

Fudge clapped James on the shoulder warmly and turned towards his private exit from the Well, with his Chief Auror

following behind, his face a grim mask of anxiety.

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### ***Nearby ...***

After a brief exchange with Harry and Artie, Snape and his new ward were headed out of the hall when a voice called out to them.

"Excuse me! Regent Snape! Heir Finch-Fletchley!"

Snape turned to see a somewhat portly wizard in professional robes excitedly heading his way. The Potions Master was startled to see that the man greatly resembled the famous ice cream vendor in Diagon Alley.

"Can I help you?" Snape asked dubiously.

"No, Regent," the man said breathlessly. "Though I may be of assistance to you. My name is Dorian Fortescue, Esq. For many years, I was the solicitor for your grandfather until his death. I was wondering if you might be free sometime to ... well, to discuss some family business."

Snape frowned. "I regret to inform you, Mr. Fortescue, that I have already engaged new counsel for House Prince. If you will give me your card, I will make sure they contact you soon for any necessary exchange of documents."

"Of course," the solicitor said as he produced a business card and handed it over. Then, he looked somewhat pained for a moment. "Nevertheless, there are some ... details of your grandfather's affairs that are ... well, *sensitive*. Matters that I suspect you might not wish to pass through other hands."

"What sort of matters?" Snape said suspiciously.

Fortescue coughed diplomatically. "Well, I can't rightly describe them here due to a secrecy oath. But ..." The man paused to lean in conspiratorially. "I can say it has to do with the circumstances by which your mother was disowned from House Prince."

Snape's face darkened. "I am well aware of how my mother came to be disowned. She married a Muggle, and my grandfather was a Pureblood bigot!"

Fortescue's face flushed at that. "Well, that's the thing, Regent Snape. There's a bit more to it than that."

The Prince Regent glared at the other man for several seconds while Justin looked on in confusion.

"When and where?" Snape finally asked.

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### ***Meanwhile ...***

Harry and Artie had almost made it to what Artie had referred to as the Wilkes Office when they heard a familiar voice calling Harry's name. It was Jim. Harry took a breath and readied himself, unsure of what his twin wanted to say. He hoped Jim wasn't planning on punching him in the face, but anything was possible. The Boy-Who-Lived darted past several witches and wizards and drew close to Harry. But then, he came to an abrupt halt and looked suddenly abashed.

"So," Jim said tentatively. "Can I still call you Harry or is it Your Lordship now?"

Harry smiled. "We're still brothers, Jim. Of course, you can call me Harry."



Jim nodded. "Cool. So ... can we talk?" he added earnestly.

"... Sure," Harry said after a brief hesitation.

With that, Artie led the way into the Wilkes Office with Harry and Jim following behind. Inside, there were two rooms: an antechamber with room for a secretary's desk but which was currently empty, and the Lord's Office itself. Said office was a twenty-by-twenty room with oak-paneled walls and plush green carpeting. There was a large mahogany desk on the far side of the room, and behind it was an enormous window with a panoramic view of the London skyline, an impressive bit of magic since the room was ten stories underground.

On one of the walls hung a life-sized portrait of Erasmus Wilkes.

Harry had only seen one picture of the man before now, a grainy black-and-white moving picture from the Daily Prophet that ran the day after Harry and Jim's disastrous 12th birthday party was attacked by one of Mr. Toymaker's creations. Harry winced. He'd always known that the train had been one of Erasmus Wilkes's cursed toys, though he'd only recently learned that it had been Peter Pettigrew who'd unleashed the damnable thing. Looking up at the portrait of the last Lord Wilkes, Mr. Toymaker himself, and with Artemus Podmore standing nearby, Harry was now suddenly and acutely aware of the fact that part of his new legacy was the same sort of dark magic that had killed Artie's wife, Elizabeth. He wondered what his friend and solicitor thought about that, but he elected not to ask while Jim was here.

"So that's the Toymaker, huh?" Jim said.

In the portrait (which had not yet been awoken), the man in question did not look like either a mad genius or a psychotic killer. Erasmus Wilkes was short and thin with close-cropped brown hair and a thick handlebar moustache. His eyes were dark grey, just like his daughter Amy's. The man's attire was a bit eccentric, but to Harry's surprise, it would not look terribly out of place among Muggles. The Death Eater in the picture wore black trousers and a green velvet smoking jacket over a white shirt and a slightly oversized yellow bowtie. Most oddly, the man had also elected to wear snake-themed house slippers for his official portrait.

Mr. Toymaker was not standing in the portrait in the typical dignified pose. Instead, he was reclining quite lazily on a bright red Victorian fainting couch with his right elbow on the armrest and his head leaning casually against his open hand. The Wilkes Lord's Ring was visible on his finger. His left hand held aloft a Meerscham pipe that seemed to be emitting large bubbles. Wilkes was grinning amiably out at the viewer, but still, as Harry looked closer, he could suddenly see *something* in his eyes, something dangerous and chilling that had not been immediately obvious. And then, Harry shuddered as he noticed a set of shelves behind the couch in the painting – shelves filled with bright and cheerful children's toys. An all-too-familiar model of the Hogwarts Express held a place of prominence.

Artie had said the original Wilkes Lord Ring was in the family vault, which they would be visiting later in the week. Interestingly, while the goblins had provided an inventory for the vault that revealed how many galleons and other valuables were piled in there (a lot!), the inventory reflected very little in the way of magical items, artifacts, or grimoires. In fact, other than Harry's Pensieve, the Lord's Ring, and a couple of antique brooms, there were no

magical items at all. Artie figured that the good stuff (or possibly, the *bad* stuff) had been sealed away elsewhere in an unknown location.

"Why is the portrait inactive?" Harry asked. "Not that I *want* to talk to the old nutter. Just out of curiosity."

"A good question," Artie answered. "Normally, any dormant portrait can be activated just by touching a wand to it and saying '*wake up*.' But apparently, that doesn't work on this one. It's possible that it can only be awoken by a family member."

"Yeah, well, I'm not testing that theory today," Harry said drily.

"I don't blame you," the solicitor replied. "Anyway, this room has been thoroughly searched and cleaned for any of Wilkes's magic. Other than the portrait, the only magical item in the room is the window, and that's standard for Lords' offices. You can change the view to anything you want within reason, but the default is the London skyline from a perspective located atop Big Ben."

He paused and looked back and forth between the brothers. "I tell you what. Why don't I leave you two alone to talk? I probably need to go do some PR work with the press."

"You might also want to be on the lookout for Mum," Jim added. "She's probably on the warpath."

Artie nodded and then left the room. Meanwhile, Harry leaned back against the desk and faced his twin. "So, you wanted to talk? Let's talk."

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## ***The Minister's Private Office***

Minister Fudge entered his office with James Potter following close behind, and the occupants of the room rose to greet him. James stumbled for a second at the sight of the man who had once been his brother in all but blood. Azkaban had not been good to Sirius Black. While he'd apparently had some degree of medical treatment since his escape, the other Marauder was still gaunt and pale with bags under his eyes. With a start, James suddenly remembered that the last time he'd seen Sirius in the flesh was on the night he was arrested.

And then, he remembered how Wormtail had stood at his side whispering encouragement to simply murder Sirius and be done with it. To his shame, James also remembered how close he'd come to doing just that.

"Lord Black," Fudge said brightly as if to dispel the emotional turmoil he was sure the two men were suffering, "I assume you heard everything through the Wireless, but just to make it official, you are a free man. The charges against you are all dismissed, and your new Proxy is installed. You have until the end of September to make your official Oath of Unity, though I certainly hope your health continues to improve such that you can do so before then."

Then, he turned somewhat stiffly to introduce James, as though the two men didn't know each other intimately. "As you can see, Chief Auror Potter is here and would like to speak to you and make his apologies for the ... regrettable incident that led to your incarceration."

Sirius nodded but said nothing. He simply looked from Fudge to Potter with a calm, impassive expression.

James swallowed painfully. "Sirius ... I ... I don't know where to begin. I only regained my true memories this morning. I know this is inadequate, but I am so *sorry* for what happened. For how foolish I was to trust Peter over you. I know if you'd been our Secret Keeper, you would never have betrayed us, and I should have stayed with you and all this could have been avoided. I can't imagine how awful Azkaban was, and I would give *anything* to undo it. I can only hope that someday, you'll see it in your heart to forgive ..."

"Oh for Merlin's sake, James," Sirius interrupted as his stony expression broke out into a cheerful grin. "Do stop blubbering!"

"...What?" James replied in confusion.

"James, I *remember* what you were like in that alley, the look on your face. And I will *never* forget that gloating sneer Wormtail gave me before I got sent off. I knew at once that you'd been Confused or worse, and that the Rat had been the one to do it. Hell, that was one of the things that kept me sane in Azkaban. The knowledge that I was innocent and that my best friend had been cursed to turn on me against his will, well, they weren't happy memories that the Dementors could take, but they were still memories I could cling to."

Sirius took a step towards James with a kindly expression. "You have nothing to apologize for with regard to my stay in Azkaban. And if you feel guilty anyway, James, then know that I forgive you completely and utterly for anything and everything you did that you feel played a part in my unjust imprisonment."

And then, Sirius held his arms wide as if inviting James in for a hug. As Fudge finally exhaled in relief at the thought that Sirius Black could be so forgiving, James rushed forward happily to embrace his friend and brother.

### ***The Wilkes Office***

Jim opened his mouth, paused, and then sighed. "I honestly don't know where to begin. I guess my first question is ... did you and Mum ever talk about all this House Wilkes business before today?"

Harry frowned at the unexpected question. "No. I learned about it through my own research and kept it to myself. Well, and Artie. Why?"

"I, uh, was sitting next her in the gallery. As soon as you started talking about an inheritance from her side of the family, she knew what you were doing. Knew and was horrified by it. I thought for a second that she was going to stand up and scream at you to stop, but it all happened too fast. Also, she kept it from Dad too. He's ... not happy."

"No," Harry said. "I don't suppose he would be."

Jim chuckled. "Not that I care too much. The way I see it, he's got no business complaining when he gets what he wants and finds it doesn't suit him."

"I ... wasn't expecting you to have that attitude. To be honest, I was expecting you to be angry with me about what happened as well. You're taking this very well, especially considering ... you know."

"You mean the Imperius?" Jim asked as he walked over and hopped up on the desk to sit next to his brother. "I still feel the urge to distrust you. But after all these months, I can

kind of feel the shape of it now. Like I can sense what it is in my head that's causing an unnatural response."

His expression darkened. "Plus, I'm feeling a wholly *natural* feeling of distrust towards my father, my mother, and my godfather right now, so what I feel towards you actually isn't as bad in comparison."

He glanced back at the portrait on the wall. "So how bad is it that we're related to that guy?"

Harry shrugged. "Obviously, James will hate it, and Lily thought it was bad enough to conceal it from everybody all this time. Still, we're only like ... eighth cousins four times removed or something like that, so I'm pretty sure we're not in danger of catching any hereditary insanity. Well, from the Wilkes line at least. We do both share a Black grandmother, after all. Anyway, I reckon if I donate a lot to charity and try to seem non-threatening, hopefully I can rehabilitate the name."

Jim nodded. "I noticed you're referring to Mum as '*Lily*' now. Does that ... does that have to do with what Uncle ... I mean what Pettigrew tried to do back in the Shrieking Shack? You know, making her choose between us?"

Harry opened his mouth to answer ...

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### ***The Minister's Office***

Alas, Minister Fudge's hopes for a joyous reunion were quickly dashed. When James was almost within hugging distance, Sirius Black's warm smile was suddenly replaced with an angry snarl, and before anyone could react, Sirius drew back an arm and sucker-punched the other man right

in the jaw as hard as he could. James staggered back and fell to the floor.

"What the hell, Padfoot?!" James barked angrily as he rubbed his chin.

"Sirius," Ted exclaimed. "Get a hold of yourself!"

"Lord Black, please!" Fudge said. Shacklebolt drew his wand in case it was necessary to separate the two while Dolores nervously moved further away.

"Please stay out of this, Minister Fudge," Sirius said in a voice like steel. "You too, Ted. This is now a matter of *House business*." Then, he turned his attention back to the man on the floor.

"As I said, Lord Potter," he spoke, now in a cold and contemptuous voice. "I don't hold you responsible for anything that led to my false imprisonment. It's what happened *after* that I blame you for!"

"What are you talking about?" James asked in confusion while he climbed to his feet.

"I am talking about the fact that you *exiled* your Heir – *my godson* to whom I had sworn a Godfather's Oath – from the wizarding world and *abandoned him* to be abused and tormented by those Muggle animals for *ten years!*"

James's face paled as Sirius continued relentlessly.

"And worse, Lord Potter, I am talking about how just today, even after learning the truth about what happened in 1981, *you still held my freedom hostage in order to blackmail Harry into surrendering his birthright!*"



James shook his head frantically. "That's not how it happened! Just listen to me, Padfoot..."

"*DO NOT CALL ME THAT NAME!*" Sirius thundered.

James's mouth clamped shut as he noticed a terrible intensity light up the other man's eyes. He'd seen that exact same glare in his mother's eyes three times during his youth. After the first time, his father had quietly explained that Dorea Potter was still a daughter of House Black and that whenever his mother had that look in her eyes, he should stay very quiet ... and be ready to run.

"The covenant is BROKEN, James Potter!" the other man snarled hatefully. "The Marauders are *NO MORE!*"

Then, to everyone's alarm, the Black Lord pulled out his wand and held it aloft, a mad rage still burning in his eyes.

"*LET MAGIC HEAR MY PRONOUNCEMENT. I, SIRIUS ORION BLACK, LORD OF THE ANCIENT AND NOBLE HOUSE OF BLACK, DO HEREBY DECLARE ENMITY BETWEEN MY HOUSE AND THE HOUSE OF POTTER. WHILE THERE IS LIFE LEFT WITHIN ME, LET HATRED FOR THE NAME POTTER FLOW THROUGH THE HEART OF EVERY BLACK!*"

Then, he lowered his wand and regarded the shocked James Potter. "Does Lord Potter reciprocate?" he asked harshly.

"N-no!" James exclaimed urgently. "No, Pad- ... Lord Black. No, I do not reciprocate. I will not claim enmity against you. And I'm truly sorry for what happened to Harry..."

"*BE SILENT!*" Sirius barked. "You do not have leave to speak of my godson *and my chosen Heir* in such a familiar

manner, *sirrah!* You *gave up* that right forever this morning!"

Sirius took a deep breath and turned to a speechless Minister Fudge.

"Minister Fudge, I am deeply grateful for your actions in securing my freedom. House Black owes you a debt. Consequently, you need not fear that I will hold your ... *unfortunate employment decisions* against you. I look forward to working with you in the Wizengamot."

Then, he turned to Dolores and bowed respectfully. "Madam Umbridge," he said simply before turning and striding towards the door, intentionally bumping into James's shoulder on the way out. With a long-suffering sigh, Ted followed Sirius out of the room. James said nothing but simply pinched his brow as he wondered how his life could get worse.

"Well," said Fudge rather sarcastically, "on the *bright side*, at least the new Lord Black isn't mad at *me*."

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### ***The Wilkes Office***

Harry did not answer Jim's question immediately. He simply stared at his twin for several seconds.

"Harry?" Jim asked.

Abruptly, Harry jumped away from the desk and moved several feet from his brother.

"What does that matter?" he snapped while keeping his back towards Jim. "She didn't have to make that choice, did she? Because *I* saved us all from Pettigrew *and* from the

killer werewolf. So, good news! I guess we'll never really know who'd she'd have chosen! Besides, it's not like she'd tell the truth if we asked her or anything!"

"Harry ... Look, I'm sorry I brought it up. I didn't mean to upset you."

Harry whirled around, his eyes flashing. "Slytherins don't get *upset*, Jim," he said coldly. "That's a Gryffindor thing."

Jim slid off the desk. "What's gotten into you?" he asked worriedly.

Harry raised his chin defiantly. "I've had a busy day, Jim. And I have lots more to do in the coming weeks. So, you'll forgive me if I'm not in the mood to waste my time babysitting you or coddling your sibling rivalry."

"Excuse me?" Jim said slowly, his own anger rising.

"You know what I'm talking about! I leave the family – and on my own terms instead of *your father shoving me out like he wanted* – and the first topic you raise when we're alone is to get reassurance that Mummy still likes you the best."

"Now wait a damn minute ..."

"SHE *SAID* SHE WAS GOING TO PICK *ME*, JIM!" Harry snarled. "Is that what you wanted to hear?! After Lily sent you off to the Hospital Wing, she told me she was willing to divorce James and take me away to France with her!"

Jim staggered back in shock as Harry continued mercilessly. "Oh! And leave you behind under James Potter's tender loving care in the process, of course!"

"N-no! That's ... that's a lie!"

Harry snorted contemptuously. "I honestly don't know. Maybe it was. Maybe she was just saying that to manipulate me. Maybe if I'd rejected her right away, she'd have gone straight to you and told you that *you* were the one she'd have chosen. Who knows? I mean, you can't be a Potter unless you're willing to *lie to your children*! That's our ... *your* biggest family tradition, right?"

Harry slowly paced around the room like a shark, never taking his eyes off Jim.

"But in the end, it doesn't matter. Rest assured, *Little Brother* – even if she'd been serious about taking me away with her, it was *never* about *choosing me*! Lily just wanted me out of House Potter as much as James did, but she was going about it smarter! Hah! After all, she is where our Slytherin side comes from!"

"What are you talking about?!"

"I'm talking about how our sainted mother was willing to martyr herself by moving to another country with me just to get me out of House Potter and to keep the Slimy Slytherin away from the precious Boy-Who-Lived! So, you see? Even when she does finally choose me, it's really to benefit YOU!"

"That's crazy!" Jim exclaimed. "You're acting nuts! Why would she do that?!"

Harry stared bitterly at his twin as he considered his words. "Prophecy," he spat with bitterness dripping from his voice.

Jim shook his head in confusion. "There's nothing in the Prophecy that applies to you," he said.

"Not *that* Prophecy, Little Brother," Harry sneered.

A silence fell on the room. "There's ... there's *another* Prophecy?"

Harry shrugged casually. "Oh, I'm sure I couldn't say, *Potter*! Oaths you know. James would never allow his slimy Slytherin ex-son to spread sensitive family matters around. But since you're *the Heir* now, maybe you should go talk to Daddy and ask him if he has any other secrets that he's kept from us *our entire lives*!"

Jim thrust his chin out defiantly. "Don't worry about me ... *Black*. I'll find out soon enough if you're telling the truth!"

With that, Jim Potter turned and angrily strode towards the door.

"And while you're at it, *Potter*, you should probably also ask Daddy who *really* put you under the Imperius!"

Jim froze with his hand on the door. Then, he shook his head angrily and left the office without turning around.

Harry glared at the door, his face a mask of cruel hatred ... for about five seconds. Then, the anger drained away as quickly as it had risen. He thought back over what he'd said in mounting horror as he mentally examined both his words and the emotions that had driven them. Suddenly, he looked around the room in a wild panic as if searching for the source of the wholly unnatural rage towards his own brother that had somehow been forced upon him.

"WHAT THE HELL WAS *THAT*?!" he shouted to the empty room.

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***Elsewhere in the Ministry***

Long after everyone else had departed the Wizengamot Chamber, the Court Reporter finally completed his duties for the day and was presently trundling his way back to his office. An innocuous figure by wizarding standards, the Court Reporter's actual name was Philoctetes Dippet ("Phil" to his few friends). He was the great-great-great-great-grandson of former Hogwarts Headmaster Armando Dippet, and at the age of 89, he was considered "the baby" of the Dippet family whose patriarch had only recently passed after 355 years. As all of Phil's siblings had been girls who married into other families, and Phil himself "did not care for the charms of the fairer sex," it was expected that the Dippet line (which was not even Noble) would end with him.

Phil had served as Court Reporter since 1965, which was the year that the elder Dippet retired from Hogwarts. The job was basically a Ministry sinecure that required Phil to carry the Book of the Wizengamot from his office on the top floor of the Ministry down to the Wizengamot Chamber for each session, read from it when directed to do so, and then carry it back up again. The rest of the Court Reporter's job consisted mainly of copying official documents and dispatching them to wherever they needed to be sent.

Most Ministry personnel assumed that the former Headmaster had pulled favors to help a descendant who was otherwise unemployable to acquire the post of Court Reporter. Phil was a genial old man who, when not reading from the Book, was known to have a terrible stammer and became easily flustered in everyday conversation. In short, he was not a very great wizard, at least when compared to his most illustrious and long-lived ancestor, and his posting as Court Reporter was the sort of career appointment that powerful Purebloods regularly obtained for their less talented kin.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Dippet," said Kingsley Shacklebolt to Phil as they stepped onto the elevator together.

"What?" Phil responded as though startled. "Oh! Oh, yes. And g-g-good afternoon to you as well, Auror ... er, Shekelbite?"

"Shacklebolt, Mr. Dippet. Kingsley Shacklebolt."

"Oh, yes. Yes, indeed, yes. Shacklebolt." Phil chuckled amiably. "You're Ainsworth Shacklebolt's l-l-little boy, aren't you? All g-grown up, I see!"

Kingsley laughed as he pulled the lever for the elevator to ascend. "Ainsworth was my grandfather, sir. My father's name was Roderick Shacklebolt."

"Ah, my mistake. Yes, yes, of course! Roderick! I remember now! He's an Auror too, is he not?"

Kingsley winced. "He was. My father died during the war, sir. Back in 1979."

"Oh goodness me! I'm so terribly, terribly sorry! Do forgive an old man's forgetfulness! I swear, if it weren't attached to my neck, I'd forget what day it was!"

"That's quite alright, sir," Kingsley said before changing the subject. "I suppose today's session was one for the history books, eh?"

"What? Oh, the session! Indubitably! Yes, yes, yes! Two new Lords, and b-b-both of them so young! And the boy of the Brother-Who-Lived is now Lord Wilkes!"

Kingsley put his hand over his mouth to cover his amusement over Phil's scrambled words. Then, he looked

up in annoyance at the sound of rattling from the top of the elevator.

"Blimey, they really need to get maintenance to check out these lifts!" the Auror muttered.

"What's that?" Phil asked loudly. Kingsley assumed the old man wouldn't be able to hear whatever sounds were emanating from the lift shaft.

"Never mind, Mr. Dippet. It's probably nothing."

Seconds later, the door opened, and the two men exited, with Shacklebolt off on whatever business brought him to this floor and Dippet headed for his own office. For Philoctetes Dippet, that meant a tiny Spartan chamber not much bigger than a large closet that was located at the far end of the hallway. After fumbling with his keys, Phil entered the office and carefully replaced The Book in its normal resting place before moving around his small desk and plopping down exhausted into a battered rolling office chair. After a few seconds, his eyes closed, and his head nodded until he fell asleep at his desk.

For exactly three seconds.

Then, Phil's head jerked up, and his eyes shot open. There was no longer a trace of his former foggy befuddlement in those eyes, which now gleamed with sharp intelligence. He whipped out his wand and spelled the door locked with precise movements and clipped incantations that bore no hint of a stammer. Then, he opened his desk drawer and removed a small mirror which he tapped three times with his wand.

"This is 009, reporting. You heard what happened over the Wireless?"



"I did," answered Unspeakable 001. "I've already sent for the other operatives who were observing the session. I'd like to have a meeting to go over Pensieve memories followed by an emergency Oversight meeting as soon as possible."

Nine snorted. "Two Oversight meetings in less than a day. I wonder who will complain the loudest: Time or Love?"

"Oh definitely Love! I'm sure she'll be *full* of helpful comments. Ten minutes?"

"Fine. But make arrangements to reschedule my interrogation of Pettigrew until later this evening."

"Copy that. Message ends."

The image of the Chief Director of the Unspeakables faded from the mirror, which Phil returned to his desk drawer. Then, he tapped his wand to the arm of his chair and uttered a password. Instantly, the seat of the chair gave way while a trapdoor opened in the floor beneath the desk. Dippet fell through and landed on the slide below that conveyed him to the Department of Mysteries at incredible speed.

And so, Philoctetes Dippet aka Unspeakable 009 aka the Director of the Mind Division went to work at his real job.

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### ***Later at 12 Grimmauld Place***

Harry Black stood with his eyes closed and his thumb and forefinger pinching the bridge of his nose, looking surprisingly like James Potter, whose face often carried the same expression of consternation in recent days.

"So," Harry said bitingly. "Let me see if I have this straight. After I *voluntarily departed* House Potter in a way that also nets me emancipation, a *Lordship*, and eleven million galleons, you decided that it was the ideal time to *curse me into having an insane and obsessive hatred of the House I just left!*"

Sirius winced at the reproach in his godson's voice. Nearby, Regulus just shook his head and took another sip of tea before returning to his newspaper.

"Well, sort of," Sirius began lamely. "But not really. I mean, an Oath of Enmity isn't actually a curse so much as ... an expression of ... righteous anger, maybe?"

Harry stared at his godfather with narrowed eyes. "*While many curses have instantaneous effects, most notably the Unforgiveables, in general, the term curse is most often reserved for dark magic that subjects the victim to a long-lasting and baleful effect that impairs the body or mind.*"

Then, he turned towards Reg, who was reading the *Daily Prophet* with unusual diligence.

"Isn't that what you taught us during my Second Year, *Professor Lockhart*?"

Reg loudly ruffled the pages of his newspaper. "Nope. Sorry. Nobody's dragging me into this mess. I just live here."

"Okay," Sirius conceded. "I *suppose* the Oath of Enmity functions as a curse. But it's not *dark magic*. And anyway, dammit, Harry, the bastard *deserved it* for what he did to you!"

"And what do *I* deserve, Sirius?" Harry asked. "Huh? I was *done* with him. I had made my peace with my father and let go of all my anger. And it felt *great*. I felt better than I had in years. Better than I had since the day I first met him. I was free and independent, and I would never have to even *think* about James Potter again. But now? *I can't stop thinking about him!* When I hear his name or even picture his face, my heart beats faster and my teeth grind. If I don't Occlude constantly, then all I can think about is how much I hate him. *I will never be rid of him!* Because *you* put your own desire for revenge ahead of *me!*"

"Harry," Sirius began, but the boy cut him off.

"And it's not just James! Lily and I were getting closer. To the point that she was offering to leave James and raise me! And now, I have to *force myself* to think of her as 'Mum' instead of '*Lily*.' Or worse, as '*that bitch*.' And I can't even *talk* to my own twin brother at all without wanting to hurt him in any way I can! He'll probably hate me forever just because of all the things I said to him the last time we spoke!"

Sirius looked away in shame. "I'm ... sorry, Harry. I didn't ... I didn't think about all that. I guess seeing James again after everything that happened. After everything I learned about what he'd done to you. I just got so *angry!*" He shook his head. "I just didn't think."

"I know. And that's the worst thing of all. With almost no thought put into it, you put a curse on me that's probably going to influence my mind at least for the rest of your life if not mine."

"Not necessarily, Harry," Regulus interrupted. "James did not reciprocate the Oath of Enmity. Despite Sirius's impetuous wording, he can still void the oath if no one from House Potter reciprocates within a year and a day."

"Wonderful," Harry said sarcastically. "Best case scenario, I'm only bound to hate my own brother until sometime in April of 1995!"

The boy's eyes flashed angrily. "It *offends* me that magic can do something like that. That it can be used for something so petty and so casually cruel. That *on a whim* a wizard can just *screw with people* that way. Twist someone's mind like wet dough. It was done to Neville. It was done to Theo. It was done to Jim. And now it's been done to me. And every time, it was done to us by *someone who was supposed to look out for us*! It's wrong! It's ... *evil*!"

"I'm not evil, Harry!" Sirius snapped angrily.

"No, you're not," Harry replied with a broken laugh. "Which is why it's so disappointing that you did such an evil thing!"

He walked over to the fireplace and tossed some Floo powder in. "Longbottom Manor!"

"Harry, wait!" Sirius said in anguish. "Please! I still want to be your godfather! Let me make it up to you somehow!"

Harry turned back to him and raised his chin defiantly. "With all due respect, Lord Black, I am emancipated now. I no longer have need of a godfather, nor anyone else to look after my affairs. While I am grateful for your offer, I am through placing my trust in other people, as I have yet to meet one who hasn't eventually proven ... *unreliable*."

Without another word, Harry stepped into the Floo and disappeared. Sirius stared after him with a wounded expression before bowing his head in defeat.

"I screwed up, didn't I?" he said quietly.

"Yep," Regulus said as he turned back to his paper.

"Do you think he'll forgive me?"

"Yes ... eventually. He'll come around in time. He's ..."  
Regulus looked up towards his brother. "He's better than us."

Sirius nodded. In his heart, he knew that it was true. And yet, somehow, the realization only made him sadder.

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### ***The DMLE Detention Center***

*"Skee-dooby-do. Scoobity do. Dooby-do-woo."*

Peter Pettigrew's odd tuneless singing continued even as another wizard banged loudly on his cell door before sliding a platter through the meal slot.

"Give it a rest, Pettigrew," snapped Malkin, the jailor who oversaw the Detention Center. "Merlin! Your singing is even worse than Rookwood's!"

At that, the singing stopped suddenly.

"And when, might I ask, did you have a chance to hear Augustus Rookwood singing?" Peter inquired.

Malkin was surprised by the Death Eater's inquiry. That remark had been the most intelligible thing Pettigrew had said in two days of interrogation.

"If you must know, traitor, Rookwood's been just down the hall from you since before we brought you in. And he went even madder than you during his captivity and torture. All he can do is sing some stupid Muggle song all day and all night. At least you break up the monotony with babbling and giggling from time to time."

Peter snickered. "I do what I can. And there's nothing wrong with Muggle songs! I happen to like a lot of Muggle songs."

Then, he finally turned his head to look straight at Malkin. "Say! Have you ever listened to the Rolling Stones?!" Then, he giggled again.

Malkin sneered at him. "Eat your gruel, traitor. You'll be going down to see the Unspeakables in a few hours to see if *they* can get you to talk. You might not be eating again for a while. Or ever."

With that, Malkin turned and stalked off. Inside the cell, Pettigrew turned his attention back to the ceiling. Specifically, to the ventilation grill set into it. After a few seconds, a soft squeaking could be heard from it. Peter smiled and gave a few soft squeaks and grunts of his own in response. This was followed by the sound of tiny claws clicking against metal that receded down the pipe and away from the Death Eater's cell.

Peter closed his eyes contentedly and resumed his tuneless singing, softer now, but with actual words this time.

"Tii-ii-ii-ime is on my side. Yes, it ii-is!"

Chapter End Notes

Next: The Escape!

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P\*\*\*\*\*n page and supported my original fiction.

Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2 (What the Sinister Man is reading): Nothing new at the moment.

AN3: The part of Dorea Black Potter will be played by Diana Rigg (at age 50), a few years after her "Avengers" days. Look up a picture of her from "A Little Night Music" to see what she looked like then. The part of Erasmus "Mr. Toymaker" Wilkes (or at least his portrait) will be played by Simon Pegg from the movie "Kill Me Three Times," one of Pegg's few villainous roles.

AN4: The last line of this chapter is from Peter Pettigrew's favorite band, the Rolling Stones: "Time Is On My Side," originally composed by Norman Reade for the Kai Winding Jazz Orchestra in 1963 and covered by the Stones in 1964 on their album "12 X 5." Peaking at #5, it was the Rolling Stones first top 10 hit. Other references in this chapter include one line cribbed from "The Devil's Advocate" and another line from Stephen Sondheim's "A Little Night Music," ironically by the same person in the same scene.

AN5: FYI, the first four italicized paragraphs of the Summerisles scene are copied from Chapter 9 of DEM, "Reactions and Overreactions, part 2."

AN6: Special thanks to my Discord editors:

Anne-athema Codex, BlueWater5, Dude, Flareix\_ [Prince Flare], Krisni, laTia, Magica, onlyonesane, pizdets UTC+10, PrettyPinkCupcake, rp3, scallionpancake, Scott, and TzarDeRus. Thanks, guys!

AN6: Vital Statistics (for FF.N): Reviews: 14,005.  
Followers: 14,764. Favorites: 12,950. Communities:  
217. Go Team POS!



# The King of Rats

## Chapter Notes

### SHAMELESS PLUG!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### ***Harry Potter and the Death Eater Menace***

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***Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.***

**TRIGGER WARNING : This character contains significant violence, character deaths, and lots and lots of rats.**

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### ***Chapter 50: The King of Rats***

***The DMLE Detention Center  
4:30 p.m.***

The prisoner was still lying in his cot pretending to nap when the door slid open with a clang. He opened one eye and smiled. He'd been expecting this conversation for a while.

"Good afternoon, James!" exclaimed Peter Pettigrew, Esq., Death Eater and traitor to the House of Potter. "And what can I do for my favorite client today?"

James said nothing until after he'd cast some high-level security Charms. After everything that had happened over the last few days, the man felt he needed this confrontation, but there was no call for anyone else to listen in. Once that was done, he conjured a chair to sit in.

"Why?" he finally said.

"Could you be a bit more specific, Prongs?" Pettigrew responded. "I've been asked *a lot* of questions since I was brought in. They all rather blend together at the moment."

James glared at him. "Pick one. Why did you betray my family? Why did you betray *me*? Why did you become a Death Eater?"

Peter laughed. "Here's another: Why should I answer your questions after resisting interrogation and torture for the last two days?"

"Because ... this may be our last chance to speak about this. In a few hours, you'll be taken down to the Unspeakables for interrogation. I don't know much about their techniques, but from the rumors, there's a chance you may not be coming back with your mind intact. So, right now, I'm not here to gather evidence. I'm here because ... I want to understand. Ever since Sirius was sent to prison ... No,

ever since *we sent* Sirius to prison, I've considered you my best friend. Was it all a lie? Were we ever friends?"

Peter studied James's face for a moment and noticed his still-bruised jaw.

"Ah! Let me guess. You went to see Padfoot to apologize for sending him to Azkaban. And he accepted your apology with his usual grace!"

James's face darkened. "Never mind about that! Just tell me! What did I do to make you hate me so much you'd become a Death Eater?"

Peter snorted. "Nothing, James. You did nothing. Which was all it took. We four were inseparable at Hogwarts. And honestly, I naively thought we'd be that way forever. And then ... we graduated, and you promptly cut me and Remus out of your life. You and *Dear Old Sirius* sauntered off to the Auror Academy, and you claimed a Wizengamot Lordship at the age of 20. Meanwhile, Remus was sent to Europe as one of Dumbledore's disposable agents, and I ... was on my own. From your wedding day until the day you came with me to my father's vault – almost a year and a half later! – we met together probably less than ten times, and *not once* at your request."

"Peter, I'm sorry if you felt ... abandoned. But for Merlin's sake! To join the Death Eaters over it?!"

He sat up in his bunk and studied James. "You know my heritage now, right?"

James nodded. "Last of the Kleinwuchs, and through them the last heir of Emeric the Evil. Is that it? You were feeling lonely and then found out where your family came from, so you decided to just ... embrace it?"

"James, in the space of a single day, I found out where my family came from – that I was the last in a *long* line of dark wizards. I also found out that my mother had never truly been ill but was just cruelly manipulating me my whole life as part of some sick psychological game. I *also* found out that my mother had *murdered* my father and grandfather and intentionally ensured that I'd grow up destitute. And finally, I found out that James Potter, who I foolishly thought was the only friend I had left, secretly viewed me a charity case who only tolerated me out of pity! A *weakling* and a suck-up who only followed him around to mooch off his wealth! A *minion* who was no longer needed! So yeah, I decided that day that since being a Gryffindor hero was apparently a sucker's game, I would become a Gryffindor *villain*."

He leaned back against the cell wall. "And as it turned out, I was surprisingly good at it ... as dear old Padfoot can attest."

"Dammit, Peter, I'm ... I'm sorry we grew apart after graduation. But I never saw you as a minion or a weakling, I promise. I always saw you as a friend."

Peter laughed.

"I'm sure you believe that, Prongs," he said almost pityingly. "But your understanding of the word '*friend*' has always been limited. Your only real friend growing up was Sirius Black, though personally, I'd describe that relationship as more as a sort of weird and slightly homoerotic co-dependency in which two chronic bullies bonded over a shared taste in victims."

"*What?!*" James sputtered angrily. But Peter just continued the speech he'd been rehearsing in his head over the last

several years.

"The James Potter I knew at Hogwarts divided the whole world into two groups. Group one consisted of those who were in a position of authority over him, those who had something he wanted, and those who were impressed with his exploits and happy to cheer his name. That group got the full measure of the Potter Heir's charm. Group two consisted of those who were not impressed by him and who had nothing to offer that he wanted. Oh, and also Slytherins. Can't leave out the Slytherins. And group two got treated as enemies to be crushed with mean-spirited pranks and belittling insults. Naturally, I decided two weeks after we met that my best chance to avoid seven years of misery was to get myself into group one, as soon as possible, which I achieved by signing up for the role of Potter's Minion and Chief Whipping Boy."

"That's not true," James said quietly. "I know the Marauders meant more to you than that. I think it still does today, Peter. Even when you were preparing to go on the run, one of the few things you felt important enough to carry with you was a picture of the Marauders from back in our school days. I found it in the bag you had with you when you were arrested."

Peter's eyes widened. "Did you really? Where is it now? I figured Lily would have claimed it for target practice or something."

James shook his head. "It's in my office. All the rest of it is in the DMLE evidence lockup, including your wand. Which, by the way, was tested after your arrest and shows that you've cast Unforgiveables. Whether you confess or not, you're going to Azkaban."

The Death Eater looked away so that the other man couldn't see the gleam in his eye. "So it would seem. You can keep the picture if you want. Hang it on your office wall so you can remember the innocence of youth. It means nothing to me now."

"Fine," James said with finality. "So, you decided that I took your friendship for granted. How did you go from that to becoming a Death Eater?"

Peter shrugged. "My grandfather's portrait told me about Augustus Rookwood's ... proclivities. I remembered him fondly from our school days as being the first teacher who ever thought I had any potential - which was rather ironic when you think about it. Anyway, I contacted him and eventually agreed to spy on the Order of the Phoenix on his behalf."

Pettigrew laughed. "And you wanna hear something funny? For the first six months I worked for Old Gus, I genuinely thought I was really working for the Unspeakables. I discovered he was a Death Eater by chance while sneaking into his home as a rat to deliver a report on the latest Order meeting, only to overhear him talking to Bellatrix Lestrange about a raid. Later, I let him know what I'd discovered, and we came to an understanding. I'd continue to spy for him, and he'd give me instruction in the Dark Arts. Between his tutelage and the grimoires in my Grandfather's vault, I turned out to be a very quick study indeed."

"And I guess that was when Rookwood gave you samples of that potion that you later used to Oblivate Lily and me," James said coldly.

"Yep. Believe it or not, I didn't use any magic to persuade Sirius to let me replace him as Secret Keeper. Having

decided that I would never get any respect from either of you, I was perfectly happy to play the role of *pathetic sniveling Wormtail* as needed, and I put the idea that no one would suspect me into his head and let him do the rest."

He laughed cruelly. "To quote one of my favorite Muggle films, *"evil will always triumph ... because good is dumb."*

James's face hardened. "Your triumph was short-lived, *Wormtail*. I remember the truth now, and you're going to pay for your crimes!"

Peter scoffed. "I'd hardly call thirteen years '*short-lived*,' Prongs. And whatever happens, not even the Dementors will be able to steal away the memories of how I fooled you all."

Then, he tilted his head quizzically. "By the way, you've obviously recovered your memories about the Secret Keeper. Did the Remembrall show ... *anything else*?"

James scowled as he recalled the pattern of flashing blue lights from the Remembrall even after his memories about the Fidelius were restored.

"It shows that I still have a lot of voluntary Memory Locks, I assume from our times in the Shrieking Shack."

"Yeah, I imagine so. For what it's worth, I don't remember any of it either. I only know what Rookwood revealed to me: that the Unspeakables were monitoring us the whole time we were at school and with Dumbledore's blessing as part of their experiments on Remus. '*The Greater Good*' and all that rubbish. But that reminds me. Obviously, Sirius reacted poorly to seeing you again. Have you talked with dear old Moony yet?"

"No," James said hesitantly. "I know he's at Hogwarts. The Fidelius that protected his identity has failed."

"He revealed the Secret to me months ago," Peter said smugly. "He was rather adamant about *not* revealing it to *you*."

"And you betrayed his trust by promising to feed my sons to him!" James snapped.

"Really just Harry. I offered to let Lily choose, but I was just screwing with her head. I would never have let Remus harm my godson. But your precious Slytherin Heir was another matter."

"You're behind the times," James snapped. "Harry is no longer my Heir. Earlier today, he went before the Wizengamot and officially disclaimed House Potter."

"Oh good. I'm glad you finally got your wish. How much did you have to pay him?"

James bristled. "That's none of your concern. Though what happened next was interesting. Peter, did *you* know that Lily is descended from House Wilkes?"

Peter's shock and surprise were visible. "Get out! Lily is related to Mr. Toymaker! Rookwood introduced me to him, you know. I found him quite affable. Viciously cruel where Muggles and Mudbloods were concerned, but otherwise a charming fellow with a delightful sense of humor."

Then, he paused, and his eyes widened. "Waitamminute! This came out today? Oh, don't tell me! Did that little bastard of yours claim the Wilkes Heirship?!"

"... The *Lordship*!"



Pettigrew stared at his former friend before bursting into laughter. "AHAHAHA! Oh sweet Merlin, that is *hilarious*! I knew there was something off about Harry, but I never dreamed he could be that much of a Slytherin! Hell, I should have been trying to *convert* him to the Dark Lord's side this whole time instead of scheming to murder him. You must be so *proud* of the little tyke!"

"SHUT UP!" James yelled as he finally lost his temper. "I DID NOT COME HERE TO BE *MOCKED* BY SOMEONE WHO'S BEEN BETRAYING ME FOR OVER A DECADE!"

"Then why are you here, Prongs?" Peter said lazily. "What's the point of this conversation?"

James rubbed his face with his hands. "I ... I don't know. But in a few days, you'll be gone to Azkaban. I guess ... I guess I just had some hopes that it was all a big mix-up. Or that I'd find some sign that you'd been Imperiused. But no. This ... this is all you, isn't it? This is what you've chosen to be."

"Yes, James," he said simply. "Everything that has happened between us since 1981 has been by my choice. And I have no regrets. None at all."

"So be it," James said as he stood and vanished the chair. "You've hurt me, Peter. Me and Jim both. But we'll survive. And you'll never hurt anyone again."

With that, James turned and touched his wand to the door to open it. But then, Peter spoke again.

"Oooh, I dunno, James. I think I might still have a *little* pain left to inflict."

James turned back to his former friend. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Peter grinned toothily. "Just between us, James. How much *did* you pay Harry to leave House Potter?"

The other man's eyes narrowed. "If you must know, eleven million galleons."

Peter fell back in his cot laughing uproariously.

"What?!" James snapped. "What's so funny? I told you once I'd be willing to give it all up to get Harry out of the family!"

"Oh, I remember, Prongs. That's what makes it so entertaining!"

Peter looked up at him with eyes that danced merrily. "Because the whole time I've been your Seneschal, you have never *once* looked at an actual Gringotts bank statement as opposed to the easy-to-read summaries I gave you!"

James's face went pale. "You son of a bitch!" he exclaimed almost dazedly.

With that, James turned and practically ran out of the cell and slammed the door shut behind him, the sound of Peter's mocking laughter ringing in his ears.

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### ***Gringotts Bank***

#### ***4:52 p.m.***

"Excuse me," James asked the bank teller in a trembling voice. "I know it's late on a Saturday, but I am James Potter, Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter, and I need to speak to my account manager immediately. It's a bit of an emergency."

The goblin teller looked down from the high window at James. His expression indicated that an emergency on James's part did not necessarily equal concern on his.

"The name of your account manager?" the goblin asked imperiously.

James considered the question and then froze, his face a sudden mask of terror. Had it really been *eight years* since he'd spoken face to face with the Potter Family account manager? Had he really been so stupid as to trust Wormtail for *that long*?

"It's, um, been a while," he stammered. "I ... I think his name had something to do with ... bones?"

The goblin teller snorted. "That could be Mr. Bone-Splitter, Mr. Bone-Crusher, or Mr. Bone-Snapper. Or possibly Mr. Marrow-Drinker, depending on how broadly we interpret '*something to do with bones*.' If you cannot narrow it down from there, I'll have to consult the records. Please have a seat in the waiting area. I will send for you when your account manager has been ... *identified*."

James accepted the dismissal and made his way to a nearby leather chair. Forty-five minutes later, the teller approached and loudly called for "Lord Potter." James rose, somewhat amazed that it was possible to invest the word "Lord" with such contempt. The diminutive creature stalked over to meet James, his bestial features and jagged teeth an odd contrast to the tailored pinstripe suit he wore.

"Yes?"

The goblin didn't even bother to hide his annoyance with James's waste of his time. "Mr. *Rib-Cracker* will see you now."

James winced and followed the creature into a nearby office. There was another goblin waiting for him behind a desk. Thankfully, this one had a nameplate and was indeed "Mr. Rib-Cracker." No first name given. James briefly wondered if goblins even *had* first names and was suddenly embarrassed that he'd been so disinterested in the creatures who controlled the national economy.

"Good evening, Lord Potter," Rib-Cracker said. "What can I do for you? Bearing in mind that it is after hours, and I will be charging time-and-a-half for consultation."

James swallowed. "Well, basically, I think I need a quick account overview. Have ... have you heard the news about my Seneschal, Peter Pettigrew?"

Rib-Cracker nodded. "We at Gringotts try to stay abreast of any developments which might affect bank operations. I take it you are concerned that the wizard Pettigrew might have abused the trust you so naively placed in him?"

"Well, I wouldn't put it *quite* like that, but ... yes."

The goblin gave him what James interpreted as a withering expression, though with goblins, it was hard to tell. Generally, they all seemed to regard wizards with barely disguised contempt. Sometimes, they didn't even bother with a disguise.

Rib-Cracker reached into a drawer and produced a thick file folder. Opening it up, he flipped through and pulled out a single document.

"Before we delve too deeply into House Potter's current financial situation, it is necessary to clarify some things for our internal records. For a start, do you concede that this is your signature at the bottom of this form?"

James glanced at the document. "Yes, that's my ... signature." His voice trailed off as he noticed the title of the paper: *Authority to Represent*.

Rib-Cracker passed over another form. "And this one?"

James nodded affirmatively, his mouth running dry as words like "co-obligor" and "indemnify" and "balloon payment" seemed to jump off the page at him.

"And this one?"

"Mr. Rib-Splitter...?"

"Rib-Cracker, Lord Potter."

"Rib-*Cracker*! Yes! Sorry!" James paused to clear his throat. "How ... how many documents are you going to ask me to verify?"

Rib-Cracker's left eyebrow rose in amusement. "There are well over fifty documents in the Potter file dating back to 1986 that *appear* to have been signed by you with no indication of duress or impairment and which gave Mr. Pettigrew authority to manage Potter funds and assets on your behalf. You will now review each document and verify that the signatures are yours and not forgeries."

"F-fifty?" James croaked.

"*Well over* fifty, Lord Potter," Rib-Cracker replied. "Of course, I'm sure I don't have to remind you that any claim that a document bearing your signature is the product of forgery will be reviewed by Gringotts, and if your forgery accusation is found to be baseless, there will be ... *severe* penalties."

James opened his mouth but couldn't seem to form words. Rib-Cracker continued.

"Only after you have confirmed that all of the relevant documents were indeed signed by you as the account holder and are not forged signatures will I be able to give you an accurate assessment of your current account status."

And then, the goblin *definitely* smiled. And James suddenly felt sick.

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***The DMLE Detention Center***  
***7:00 p.m.***

Peter waited alone in solitude for several hours before the door opened again. This time, it was Senior Auror Kingsley Shackbolt and Junior Auror Michael Proudfoot.

"On your feet, Pettigrew," Shackbolt said. "It's time to go."

Peter rose from his bunk as the Auror produced a set of manacles with familiar runes carved into them. Unsurprised, the Animagus held out his hands so Shackbolt could bind him with the enchanted chains that would prevent him from turning into a rat after leaving this special Anti-Animagus cell.

He said nothing as the two men escorted him from the cell and down the hallway, not until he heard a soft sound from down a side corridor. The sound of someone singing in a tired broken voice.

*"Tiptoe ... through ... the window ... B-by the w-window ... that ... that ... that ... that is where I'll be ... C-c-come ... come ... tiptoe through the t-t-tulips ... with ... me."*

"Is that Rookwood singing?" Peter said in surprise as he stopped suddenly. Proudfoot shoved him to get him moving again.

"Never you mind, Death Eater. Just hope you don't end up like him when the Unspeakables are done with you!"

The three men continued down the hall and stopped at a reception area, where Shacklebolt formally announced to the guards that he was escorting prisoner #994-329-A to the Department of Mysteries for special interrogation. Then, he touched his wand to the clipboard that the head guard held out, and his signature magically appeared on it.

From there, the two Aurors and their prisoner made their way out of the DMLE detention center and down the main corridor. It was a Saturday evening, and most of the Ministry offices were closed, but there were still a few dozen wizards and witches working a late shift. Along the way, they passed by several other DMLE sub-departments. At one intersection near the Auror Office, they met a figure Peter had come to know well, if not exactly on a friendly basis: Rufus Scrimgeour, who for some reason was carrying a plate holding several large slices of chocolate cake.

"Ah! Kingsley!" said the former Chief Auror said brightly. "I don't know if you've heard, but we're having a little get together down in the main Conference Room on Level 3 to celebrate Pius's Order of Merlin award. I was just headed to the Auror Office to deliver some cake to Robards and the trainees who are covering dispatch. Arthur's wife made it, so naturally, it's going fast."

"I got the memo, Rufus," Shacklebolt said. "Proudfoot and I will join you there once we've delivered Pettigrew to the Unspeakables."

"Excellent!" Rufus turned to Peter with a smug expression. "I'm sure they'll take good care of you down there, Pettigrew. And I do hope the DMLE's accommodations have been to your liking."

"Oh, they've been lovely, Scrimgeour. Definitely 4-star." Peter glanced down at the older wizard's cane and smirked. "By the way, *how's the leg?*"

Rufus's smile instantly turned into a scowl even as Proudfoot roughly shoved the prisoner past him and on down the hall. Soon, they had reached the express elevator dedicated to Auror use. Shacklebolt did not press the elevator button. Instead, he touched his wand to it and said aloud "Kingley Shacklebolt and Michael Proudfoot, escorting prisoner Peter Pettigrew to the Department of Mysteries."

From deep in the bowels of the Ministry, the ancient elevator began its ascent. A few moments later, there was a loud ding as the doors opened. Auror Proudfoot frowned to see that the compartment was empty.

"Where's the lift operator?" he asked.

"We're going to the Department of Mysteries, Proudfoot," Shacklebolt answered as he nudged Pettigrew inside. "There's never an operator when the lift is headed down to Level 9."

"Sorry," said the young Auror bashfully. "I've never actually been to Level 9 before."

Peter snorted. "As I recall, Auror Proudfoot, you've been in service barely a year. I'll wager there's lots you haven't done yet."



"Quiet, prisoner," Proudfoot snapped.

"Easy, Proudfoot," the older Auror said as he pressed the button marked 9. "He's just trying to get in your head."

Oddly (by Muggle standards at least), the levels of the Ministry of Magic were numbered in reverse order, with Level 1 (Offices for the Minister and Administrative Staff) at the top, ironically just below the basement that constituted the lowest level of Whitehall. The DMLE and all its associated law enforcement agencies (as well as the Auror Corps, despite its independent status) were below that on Level 2. The Chamber of the Wizengamot and its related facilities were on Level 10, all the way at the bottom of the complex. The Department of Mysteries was on Level 9 but could only be accessed by outsiders with special permission.

The lift began its descent.

### **Level 3: Magical Accidents and Catastrophes.**

"Merlin," Proudfoot said with a loud sniff, "They still haven't found out what's causing that stench, have they?"

Suddenly, there were several audible "*thumps*" emanating from atop the elevator. All three men looked up.

"And they haven't found out what's been rattling the pipes in this whole bloody place all weekend, either!" he added.

### **Level 4: Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.**

"It's an old building, Proudfoot," Shacklebolt said easily. "There's always parts of it breaking down."

"Say, Kingsley!" Peter began. The Auror glared at him.

"You will address me as Auror Shacklebolt, prisoner, or not at all!"

More and louder thumps came from atop the elevator.

### **Level 5: International Magical Cooperation.**

"Oh, definitely, Auror Shacklebolt, sir!" Peter responded with a cheeky grin. "But I just had a quick question."

"Is there something moving around up there?" Proudfoot asked somewhat nervously with his eyes trained on the top of the lift.

"Alright, Pettigrew," said Shacklebolt, "*what* is your question?"

### **Level 6: Magical Transportation.**

Pettigrew held up his shackled wrists. "Do you know why I have to wear these special manacles?"

Even louder bumps and clattering.

"We know you're an illegal Animagus, Pettigrew," Shacklebolt snapped. "Those manacles are there to keep you from using your powers."

"Yeah," Proudfoot said a bit louder, while ignoring the conversation. "There is definitely something moving around up there!"

### **Level 7: Magical Games and Sports.**

Kingsley took his eyes off Pettigrew and looked up to the ceiling in response to Proudfoot's comment, and the first hint of concern entered his eyes. But it was already too late.

Peter chuckled. "These manacles stop me from changing my form. *But I'm still an Animagus!*"

And then, *Peter Pettigrew SQUEALED!*

In response, the banging and clattering from atop the lift suddenly grew much, much louder, to the point of causing the lift car itself to shudder, until finally, the trap door in the roof of the car broke from its hinges and fell to the floor.

And rats *poured* into the elevator car!

### **Level 8: The Atrium**

Some of the rats fell directly to the floor only to pick themselves up and immediately attack the Aurors' legs. Others fell (or *jumped*) from the opening straight onto their heads to bite and claw at their faces. Prepared for the attack, Pettigrew lunged forward and hit the elevator's emergency stop button. The car shuddered violently to a stop halfway between Levels 7 and 8, and the jolt caused Proudfoot to fall to the floor. Then, he began screaming hysterically as dozens of furious rats began pouring over him. Shackbolt lost his balance but managed to steady himself against the elevator wall even as he pulled his wand back out to stun the Death Eater.

**"STUPEFY!"**

To the Auror's frustration, one of the rats still atop the car jumped down directly into the path of his spell, almost as if it had been deliberate. The flash of red light impacted the rat, which fell to the floor unconscious. Taking his opportunity, Pettigrew dashed forward, grabbed Shackbolt's wand arm with both hands, and slammed it against the wall. Then, with a feral snarl, *he bit deeply into the man's wrist!*

Shacklebolt let out a scream of pain to match the screams of terror produced by Proudfoot, who was still on the floor and half-buried under a carpet of rats that were biting and scratching all over his body. By now, there were at least two-score rats in the lift car, with one half crawling over Proudfoot and the other half attacking Shacklebolt from all angles. Furiously, the Senior Auror lashed out with his free hand and slugged Pettigrew across the jaw hard enough to knock him away. Unfortunately, his bite was too strong, and a large chunk of flesh from Shacklebolt's hand went with it. He screamed again, and his wand fell from numb fingers.

Quickly, he looked around the floor searching for his wand so that he could summon it back to his hand. But before he could spot it, Pettigrew jumped on top of him with an inhuman fury, blood still dripping from the Death Eater's mouth. Shacklebolt tried to get his hands up into a defensive posture even as a black rat that had crawled up his back took a bite out of his ear, but Pettigrew was too fast. He managed to get one hand on each side of the Auror's neck, which had the effect of stretching his manacle chains tightly across the other man's throat!

Pettigrew's weight fell on top of Shacklebolt, and they both landed on the floor with the Death Eater on top. Shacklebolt let out a gargling cry as the manacle chain cut off his air supply. Desperately, he clawed at the chain with one hand whilst pawing ineffectually at Peter's face with the other. Beside them, Proudfoot's screams reached an even higher pitch as several rats that had crawled up his trouser legs approached a part of his anatomy that was particularly vulnerable to tiny, sharp teeth.

As Shacklebolt's vision started to swim from oxygen loss, he finally slapped one hand against Pettigrew's face and tried to dig a thumb into his eye. Pettigrew bellowed in pain

before giving out a high-pitched "*SCREEE!*" In response, a half-dozen rats swarmed up Shacklebolt's semi-prone body to target his face. Despite his years of training and experience, the seasoned Auror couldn't help but suffer a moment of panic, and he reached up with both hands to pull the rats away from his vulnerable eyes. That was all Pettigrew needed.

In a flash, Peter changed his grip, grabbing the Auror's throat with one hand and the back of his neck with the other. Then, with a savage roar, he *twisted*. There was a sudden audible *snap*, and Kingsley Shacklebolt fell back to the floor, limp and lifeless.

"HAH!" Peter yelled in exultation. He'd killed quite a few people in the years since the Dark Lord fell, but never like this. Like an animal. Like something *wild*. He spent a few seconds cackling in delight before he was distracted by a soft squeaking sound from the floor. It was a chubby albino Agouti rat with mismatched eyes (one black and one pink) that held a wand clenched in its teeth. With a delighted grin, Peter took the wand from the rat.

"Thank you!" he said politely.

Then, he turned towards the other Auror and let out a few quick squeaks. Immediately, all the rats that were attacking Proudfoot's face and chest jumped away from him. His vision now clear, Proudfoot's eyes widened as he saw the wand pointed at his face.

"No! Please! I beg ...!"

**"AVADA KEDAVRA!"**

The lift car was briefly illuminated by a brilliant green light, and Michael Proudfoot slumped lifeless. Pettigrew frowned.

The Killing Curse was efficient to be sure, but he was now *quite certain* he preferred killing by hand. He hoped he'd have the chance to do it again before the day was done.

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## ***The Early Warning Office Department of Mysteries***

*BONG!*

The unexpected sound of a chime ringing in the Early Warning Office startled Unspeakable 029, causing him to nearly choke on his ham-and-cheese sandwich.

*"Honestly!"* he thought angrily. *"Why is it always while I'm trying to eat!"*

He took a quick swig of tea to clear his throat before grabbing his wand and his communication mirror and heading off into the maze of hanging chimes that filled the room. To Bode's relief, it was not Chime #4 or any of the other particularly dreaded warning chimes, but as he made his way to the back of the room, he grimaced upon seeing which one *was* ringing. While probably not apocalyptic, it certainly wasn't good news either.

"This is Unspeakable 029. The 53rd chime has just sounded, indicating that an unscheduled Unforgiveable Curse has been cast somewhere within the Ministry. Message ends."

Thirty seconds later, an announcement echoed through the entire level via a magical intercom system.

"ATTENTION, ALL DEPARTMENTAL PERSONNEL. AN UNAUTHORIZED CODE 53 HAS TAKEN PLACE. UNTIL

FURTHER NOTICE, THE DEPARTMENT OF MYSTERIES IS IN LOCKDOWN!"

At the foyer in front of the express elevator, Phil Dippet (aka Number Nine) turned to the two operatives who had come with him to take custody of Peter Pettigrew.

"Oh," he muttered. "*that's* not good."

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### ***The elevator ...***

Quickly, Pettigrew searched Shacklebolt's corpse and found the keys to his manacles. For good measure, he also claimed Proudfoot's wand. Neither was as compatible as his own wand, but having killed their former owners, either would serve for the time being. He rose from the floor and dragged his sleeve across his face to wipe off some of Shacklebolt's blood. Then, he switched off the emergency stop and pressed the button for Level 2. And for good measure, he also pressed the button for Levels 3, 4, and 5.

As the lift slowly started to rise once more, Peter Pettigrew turned his attention to the mass of obedient rats that teemed at his feet. Slowly at first but with increasing speed, he waved his stolen wand over them in a lazy swirling pattern while he whispered a spell he sometimes felt he'd been waiting to use his whole life.

"*Ratusemptra Geminio. Ratusemptra Geminio. Ratusemptra Geminio. **RATUSEMPRA GEMINIO!***"

Pettigrew timed the final incantation for just as the lift *dinged* to announce its arrival on Level 5 (*International Magical Cooperation*). There was a flash of light, and the two Ministry employees who'd been standing by the lift were shocked when the doors opened to reveal Peter

Pettigrew ... and a sea of rats that stood almost up to his waist which immediately poured out into the hall and swarmed the hapless wizards in front of the doors.

Peter squealed his instructions with glee. Down the hall, he noticed a witch and a wizard each pull out their wands to target the carpet of rats rushing towards them. Without hesitation, the Death Eater struck them both with an Expelliarmus Duo that left them helpless on the floor before the approaching swarm. As the lift doors slowly closed, Pettigrew could just make out the sounds of screams and spellfire from elsewhere on that level. He smiled and then started casting his Rat-Doubling Curse again on the thirty or so rats who remained at his feet instead of surging out into the hall with their brethren.

*"Ratusempra Geminio. Ratusempra Geminio. Ratusempra Geminio."*

When Peter began casting that spell the first time, there were only about forty rats in the lift car with him. When the doors opened onto Level 5, more than 100 spilled forth into the hallway. Within ten minutes, there were *more than a thousand rats* on Level 5, and their numbers only grew.

When properly applied, the Gemino Curse was *very* effective.

Moments later, after dropping off similar deliveries on Levels 4 and 3, the lift doors finally opened on Level 2. "**RATUSEMPRA GEMINIO!**" There was another flash of light, though there was no one in the hallway to see it or to witness the plague of rats that poured out of the lift in response. When the rats were all gone, the lift was empty save for the bloodied corpses of Kingsley Shacklebolt and Michael Proudfoot.



Hiding among the magically duplicated rats was one brown Norwegian rat ... that wasn't a rat at all.

***A few minutes earlier on Level 3 ...***

The congratulatory fete for Order of Merlin recipient Pius Thicknesse was winding down, and while most of the well-wishers had already left, about twelve or so remained in the Conference Room on Level 3. Among the remaining guests were Thicknesse himself; Junior Aurors John Dawlish and Victoria Savage; Undersecretary Dolores Umbridge; and Thomas and Violetta Edgecombe. Thomas was the Director of the Portkey Office (and a friend of Pius's dating back to their Hogwarts days), while Violetta worked in the Floo Network Authority. The rest were mostly hit wizards and their significant others, as Pius himself was a former hit wizard who'd worked his way up into the Auror Corps after going back to retake several NEWTs. Consequently, he had already become something of an idol among DMLE officers even before obtaining an OoM.

The Edgecombes were just offering Thicknesse their congratulations when the screams started out in the hall.

"What the hell?" Dawlish said as he opened the door to step outside, with a few others right behind him. Once outside, his eyes widened in shock at the sight of *a moving carpet of rats* racing straight towards them. The screams had come from several wizards and witches who'd gotten caught in the flood of vermin and knocked to the ground where they were quickly mauled. Beside Dawlish, Dolores Umbridge stifled a scream of horror.

"***WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA!***" Thicknesse called out, and the bleeding body of Auror Williamson (the only fallen victim still alive) rose up above the mass of rats, though

several of the foul creatures still clung to his body and continued to bite and claw.

Beside Thicknesse, Dawlish thrust his wand out in a wide arc. "**DEPULSO!**" A wave of force shot out to hit the front of the approaching wave of rats, and dozens of them were blasted into the air. But to the Aurors' shock, every one of the rats struck by Dawlish's spell gave off a sudden flash of light and then split into *two more rats!*

"Merlin's bones!" one of the hit wizards exclaimed from the doorway. "They can replicate!"

"Impossible!" Auror Savage exclaimed. "The Gemino Curse doesn't work on living things!"

"Obviously, someone developed a variation," Umbridge said before she took a deep breath and pointed her own wand at the advancing swarm. "**EXPECTO PATRONUM!**" A blast of silvery fog shot out of her wand towards the rats.

Thicknesse shook his head. "That won't work, Madam Umbridge! A Patronus Charm won't affect ...!"

He trailed off in surprise as the silvery fog condensed down into the shape of a glowing silver cat which hissed angrily at the rats. To the Auror's surprise, the Patronus's manifestation frightened the vermin enough to temporarily halt their approach.

"... Okay! I stand corrected!" he said.

"Seriously," Dawlish muttered. "Am I the *only one* without a Patronus?"

"Never mind that, Johnny!" Pius exclaimed. "The little lady's feline friend is slowing them down, but not stopping them.

Give me an overlapping Protego about five feet ahead of the rats!"

Dawlish and Savage nodded, and the three Aurors cast simultaneously. Instantly, a powerful protective shield sprang up to bar the path of the vermin, though it would not hold for long. Beside the three Aurors, Dolores Umbridge focused her concentration on her cat Patronus and tried to ignore the way her cheeks flushed when the Senior Auror called her "little lady."

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### ***The Detention Center***

On this Saturday night late shift, there were only two guards overseeing the DMLE Detention Center, Sgts. Kenneth Malkin and Gordon Chumley, the latter of whom was on his way back from making his evening rounds. Malkin was manning the desk and so was the first to notice the plague of rats that poured into the lobby area. As he stood up in confusion and raised his wand to sound the alarm, Malkin didn't notice that one of the rats had stopped abruptly as the rest swarmed past. He *did* notice when Peter Pettigrew suddenly appeared out of nowhere with a wand that he pointed right in Malkin's shocked face.

***"IMPERIO!"***

As he returned from further inside the Detention Center, Chumley yelled out in consternation at the sea of rats. "Kenny! What the devil is going on ...?!"

Chumley's question was cut short when he turned the corner to see Malkin staring at him with a glazed expression as the other man brought his wand to bear.

***"PETRIFICUS TOTALUS!"***

Gordon Chumley froze instantly, his face a mask of surprised betrayal. Then, he slowly tipped backwards and landed on the floor. Immediately, the rats swarmed his paralyzed body.

"Bon appétit," Pettigrew quipped before turning back to Malkin. "Take me to Augustus Rookwood."

As the entranced guard calmly led the way, the carpet of rats scurried to clear a path for the two wizards. When they passed by the frozen Chumley, the pitiful sounds of muted screams could be heard despite his mouth being locked shut.

"When you're done eating," Peter said, though only the rats could interpret his squeaks and chitters, "go swarm Auror HQ. Kill anyone you meet along the way."

At Pettigrew's direction, Malkin calmly opened the door to Rookwood's cell and then stepped back to await further orders. No more would come.

**"*AVADA KEDAVRA.*"**

As Kenneth Malkin's body dropped to the floor, Peter idly summoned the dead man's wand to add to his collection. He took a step closer to the cell but did not go in. He just stared in shock.

Inside the dingy cell, Augustus Rookwood, who had once been an Unspeakable and a Hogwarts professor, stood near the far wall and swayed slowly back and forth. His hair was long and stringy, and his face was mostly hidden behind a filthy beard that grew halfway to his waist. The Death Eater was still wearing his filthy Azkaban prisoner's uniform with a straitjacket binding his arms tightly. His head was bowed,

and his eyes were closed. And in a broken raspy voice, he was *singing*.

"*Tiptoe ... through ... the window ... B-by ... by ... by the w-window ...*"

"Oh, Gus," Peter whispered sadly. "What have they done to you?"

---

### ***Auror HQ (On the opposite end of Level 2)***

"I repeat," said the floating silver turtle Patronus, "we are trapped in the Level 3 Main Conference Room by what look to be thousands of extremely aggressive rats. Also, they appear to be under some customized version of the Geminio Curse. Whenever one of them is killed or even hit by a spell, they multiply. Request backup."

Gawain Robards stared at Thicknesse's Patronus in amazement. Next to him, the two Auror trainees (Annabelle Penrose and Tristan Brown) were equally shocked, while Rufus Scrimgeour scowled angrily.

"Rats," he said grimly. "And it just so happens that you have a rat Animagus in custody. I cannot help but believe the two are connected, Gawain."

"I agree," said Robards. "***EXPECTO PATRONUM.***"

With a flash of silver light, Robards' peregrine falcon Patronus appeared in the air before him.

"Go to Kingsley Shacklebolt. Tell him to report to me at once on the status of his prisoner." But the Patronus didn't

leave. It simply hung in the air and shook its head. Robards looked stricken.

"Oh no," he said sadly.

"Robards!" yelled Penrose as she pointed to the glass doors at the main entrance to Auror HQ. A wave of rats was heading down the hall towards them. Undaunted, Robards charged out the doors, with the other three following behind.

"Ventus Maximus on three!" he ordered.

The three Aurors and Scrimgeour cast their spells simultaneously and a powerful gust of wind suddenly blasted the approaching swarm back about ten feet. Unfortunately, it also caused their numbers to swell.

"This is not a long-term solution, Gawain," Rufus said angrily.

Robards's eyes narrowed in concentration. "You three keep it up but terminate your spells on my signal!"

With that, the Senior Auror knelt down, touched his wand to the floor and began to concentrate. After about ten seconds (during which time the army of rats grew to frightening proportions), Robards finally yelled "NOW!" Rufus and the two trainees ended their Wind Charms, and the rats surged forward.

Robards did nothing.

"Anytime now, Gawain," Rufus said somewhat nervously.

Robards still did nothing, although a bead of sweat appeared on his forehead due to his intense concentration.

"*Gawain?!*"

Then, when the rats were less than ten feet away, the floor beneath the rats began to sparkle. While the underfloor, like most of the infrastructure of the Ministry building, was made of Transfiguration resistant materials, the decorative tiles that covered that floor were not so protected. Nor was the glue that held those tiles down. Just before the rats could reach the four people, Robard's Transfiguration effect took hold, and the floor tiles transformed into the same material used to hold them in place.

In other words, the entire rat swarm was now trapped and choking in a pool of sticky industrial glue several inches thick.

Robards sighed in relief. "As I thought. Magical attacks or brute force trigger the duplication effect, but once transfigured, the glue is just ordinary glue. They're stuck and can neither move nor duplicate!"

"Clever, Gawain," Scrimgeour said. "Quite clever."

"What's our next move, sir?" asked Penrose.

"The DMLE Detention Center," Rufus said authoritatively before Gawain could answer.

"What?" Robards responded. "Why? There are already guards posted at the DMLE. If this is Pettigrew's doing, we need to start searching for him before he escapes the building, not to mention provide backup to Thicknesse's group."

Rufus shook his head. "Assuming *arguendo* that this *is* Pettigrew's doing – and I am *certain* it is – then he's not trying to escape. If he's gotten the best of Kingsley

somehow, he could have turned into a rat and discreetly escaped the building using any public toilet. Instead, he summoned whole armies of rats to attack Auror HQ and a social event attended by every Auror in the building besides ourselves. He wants us distracted and preoccupied because he has some objective here in the Ministry building to achieve before he can leave. And according to the memories of his monologue to Lily Potter, Pettigrew initially took her and her two sons hostage with the goal of freeing *Augustus Rookwood*."

"Rookwood is practically brain dead," Robards snapped.

"Perhaps, though I have less confidence in the pronouncements of the Unspeakables than you. But I am certain that is where Pettigrew is headed."

The Senior Auror sighed loudly. He'd worked with Scrimgeour for decades, and when the old man talked like this, he was almost always right.

"Okay, we'll check that out first. But *you* are staying here, Rufus! You're in no shape for combat, and you won't be able to keep up with us anyway."

While Rufus fumed at that instruction, Robards turned to Brown and Penrose and ordered them to fetch three brooms from the nearby equipment storeroom. Then, he summoned a Patronus once more to deliver another message.

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### ***The Conference Room on Level 3*** ***A moment later***

Pius Thicknesse's brow furrowed thoughtfully as the peregrine Patronus faded away.



"Immobilize them? Without using magic directly on them? Anyone have any ideas on how to do that?"

Dawlish, Savage, and the recovering Williamson were stumped (and the three hit wizards who had joined them out in the hall were too focused on maintaining their Protego shields to even listen). To Pius's surprise, it was Umbridge who spoke up.

"The fire sprinkler runes in the ceiling!" she exclaimed brightly. "Magic summons the water they produce, but the water itself is nonmagical!"

Dawlish snorted. "Maybe so, but how is it going to help us to get the rats wet?!"

"Water *freezes*, Auror Dawlish," she replied tartly.

Thicknesse's head turned sharply in response to that, and his face broke out into a fierce smile.

"I like the way you think, Madam Umbridge!"

"Please," she said somewhat bashfully. "Call me Dolores."

His smile grew broader. "Pius," he said simply.

Dawlish rolled his eyes. "And I'm *John*! Now can we do this before we get overrun? Or do you two want to flirt some more?"

Thicknesse gave his comrade a sour look, but he did not answer. Instead, he simply pointed his wand up to the ceiling a few feet away from everyone and let fly with an Incendio. After a moment or two, a loud alarm sounded, and then water began to pour from the ceiling, drenching the Aurors, the guests, and the rats alike.

"Right!" Pius bellowed towards the hit wizards. "On three, you boys drop those shields. At the same time, Johnny and Vicki, hit 'em with a Glacius Maximus."

"I know that spell as well ... Pius!" yelled Dolores over the sound of pouring water. He turned and smiled at her again.

"Then, by all means, feel free to join us! But stay behind the Aurors. Ready? One, two, *three!*"

The shields fell, and the rats surged forward only to be met by a blast of frigid arctic air emanating from four wands. The icy blast traveled the length of the corridor, and when it had passed, all the rats were completely encased in ice.

Pius exhaled. "Okay, that's one crisis down!" Then, he called Violetta Edgecombe to the door of the conference room.

"Madam Edgecombe, where is the nearest Floo?"

The Floo Authority regulator thought for a moment even as she shivered from the cold water. "The-the only one on this level is on the far side of the b-building! If the emergency stairs down the hall are c-clear, the closest one is actually up-upstairs in Auror HQ!"

Thicknesse nodded before turning to two of the hit wizards nearby, wiping water out of his eyes as he spoke. Meanwhile, Umbridge sent her friend a Warming Charm to counter the effects of being drenched.

"Jensen and Eagleton, escort the civilians to Auror HQ and see that they evacuate the building via Floo! The rest of us will make our way through this floor to clear it of rats and locate anyone else trapped in here! We'll send anyone we find your way!"

Dolores stepped forward and opened her mouth, but Pius interrupted before she could speak.

"That includes you, ma'am!" he said while running his fingers through his wet hair to clear it from his eyes. "You're the Minister's Undersecretary! Your job is too important to risk your safety on the front lines."

With that, Thicknesse led the group carefully through the minefield of frozen rats towards the stairwell down the hall.

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### ***The Detention Center***

*"Tiptoe ... through ... the window ... B-by the w-window ..."*

By now, Rookwood was just starting his fifth iteration of the annoying song since Pettigrew's arrival, despite all the Animagus's efforts to break through to him.

"Mr. Nemo," Peter said in a deep authoritative voice. "It's Mr. Norvegicus. Our Lord calls for you. *Are you with us?!*"

*"By the w-window ... window ... window ... that is where I'll be ..."*

Peter's face grew anguished at the sight of his mentor's current condition and banged his arm angrily against the cell door's bars.

"DAMMIT, GUS!" he finally yelled. "IT'S ME! PETER! SNAP OUT OF IT, MAN! I NEED YOU!"

Suddenly, and seemingly in response to Peter's outburst, Rookwood suddenly stopped swaying and singing. Then, without lifting his head or opening his eyes, he sighed deeply and then spoke.

*"Peter," he said in a raspy and yet oddly annoyed tone of voice. "Would you please just shut up for a moment? I'm trying to reconfigure my compromised psychic architecture. I'll be with you in a moment."*

Pettigrew opened his mouth to respond but then abruptly shut it again as Rookwood's words suddenly hit him. The other Death Eater resumed his slow sway and wretched tuneless singing.

*"Come ... tip ... tip ... tiptoe through ... the t-t-tulips ... with ... me."*

Then Rookwood went silent for a long moment before slowly raising his head and opening his eyes. He coughed and cleared his throat but then began to speak with easy confidence.

"Much better," he said to himself before he got a good look at his rescuer. Then, his head jerked, and his brow furrowed in surprise.

"You've lost weight!" he exclaimed.

"... Yeah. I've been rather active these last thirteen years."

Rookwood nodded. "Thirteen ... years? Has it really been that long?"

Peter grimaced. "I'm afraid so. Was it ... was it awful? Being in Azkaban all this time? You made me promise not to even try to get you out ...!"

Peter trailed off even as Rookwood's eyes danced in a strange amusement. "Was Azkaban ... *awful*, you ask?"

He gaped at younger wizard for a few seconds and then threw back his head and laughed.

"Azkaban was ... *perfect*! Everything I'd hoped for when I was sent there!" The man sounded excited, almost exultant. "Thirteen years of solitude within the fabled Tower of Ekrizdis where I could complete *my masterpiece* - a psychic oubliette of *forty-nine* interlocking mind-streams! And even better, thirteen years of *constant* Dementor exposure to test it against!"

He laughed again. "My mind is impregnable now, Peter. An unassailable tower of will!"

"... Okay. That's ... nice, I guess," replied Peter, who didn't actually understand what his old friend was talking about. With a slash of his wand, the prisoner's straitjacket fell to the floor in pieces. Rookwood stepped forward and began to stretch his arms to get the kinks out.

"I managed to pick up some wands on the way here..." Peter began while pulling the pilfered wands out of a pocket.

"None of those are compatible," Rookwood said without even looking. "Though I can probably overpower the cherry one enough to make it work."

He put out his hand, and one of the wands flew from Peter's hand into the older man's. Immediately, a weak burst of red sparks shot from its tip.

"Okay, that's another problem solved," Peter said while stuffing the other wands back into his pocket. "Now we need to *OH CRUMBS!*"

Instantly, Peter transformed into his rat form just in time, as several Stunners flew through the space where his human form had just stood. The rat darted into the cell while squealing in panic.

Outside, Aurors Robards, Brown, and Penrose floated in the corridor, still on the brooms they'd used to fly over the glue-encased rat infestation. As Gawain saw Pettigrew transform and then run into the cell, he cursed himself for not being faster or at least stealthier. And worse, before the rat entered Rookwood's cell, he clearly had been *talking* to the prisoner inside. Robards whispered instructions to his companions before flying his broom down the corridor to the other side of the cell. As he'd hoped, no spellfire came as he passed.

The Senior Auror abandoned his broom and crept back towards Rookwood's cell as Brown and Penrose did the same from the other direction. When they were all just a few feet from the door, he held up a hand and silently counted down from three. On the count of zero, all three Aurors stepped into the doorway to fire off simultaneous Stunners. But even as Robards cast, he felt a momentary dread when he saw Augustus Rookwood – free, armed, and clearly in possession of his faculties – standing in the corner of the cell with his wand pointed at them.

The three wizards called out "**STUPEFY!**" in unison. And all three Stunners struck their target ... a doppelganger of Rookwood that instantly winked out of existence. At the same time in the opposite corner, Rookwood's Disillusionment Charm faded to reveal the Death Eater pointing his wand straight at the Aurors.

**"IMPERIO HORRIBILIS!"**

All three Aurors were shocked at those words, for none of them had known that the Horribilis modifier could even be added to the Imperius Curse. Nevertheless, like most Aurors and all Senior Aurors, Gawain Robards had received extensive training in resisting the Imperius Curse. And so, as soon as Rookwood said the word, Robards steeled himself against the familiar sensation of floating away as if nothing mattered save the intoxicating sensation of blissful ignorance.

This was nothing like Auror training.

The sensation that struck Robards like a wrecking ball was not a feeling of total bliss but one of *irrelevance*, of the absolute certainty that he was *nothing* compared to the man before him, of the realization that he was so completely *insignificant* that surrender was the only possible option.

But despite the onslaught, Robards was still an Auror, and he hadn't survived the job this long by being weak-willed. Calling on his limited Occlumency training and, more importantly, a desperate urge to *survive*, he slowly turned his wand towards Rookwood. Now, if only he could think of the right spell to cast. Something that would end this threat no matter what the cost. But against Rookwood's power, remembering and even thinking was *just so hard*.

**"AVADA KEDAVRA."**

"*Oh yeah,*" Robards thought in the last millisecond of his life. "*That would have done the job.*"

Then, Gawain Robards' body dropped to the floor, lifeless, to land at the feet of the two Imperiused trainee Aurors who had just murdered him at the command of their new master. When his arm hit the ground, Robards' wand fell

from his limp fingers. It bounced once and then rolled across the floor to stop near Rookwood's feet. The Death Eater looked down at the wand and smiled before summoning it to his hand.

"Blackthorn," he said as angry red sparks shot forth. "With a dragon heart-string. Much better."

With that, Rookwood calmly exited his cell, casually stepping over Auror Robards' corpse as he did. A suitably impressed Pettigrew resumed his human form and followed him. Once in the corridor, Rookwood addressed the two Auror trainees even as he touched his wand to each of their foreheads in turn.

"I am placing within your minds the location of a room on Level 6. Inside it, you will find a central column covered in runes. You will go there now as quickly as possible. Then, you will force your way inside and destroy that column with point-blank Bombarda Maximas. If you survive the explosion – and the resulting magical backlash – you will make your way through the Ministry building, killing anyone you encounter, with particular focus on Aurors, hit wizards, and high-ranking Ministry personnel."

Brown and Penrose saluted Rookwood smartly as if he were a superior officer, and then they turned and sprinted back to their abandoned brooms before flying away on their urgent mission. Rookwood noticed Pettigrew looking at him with a curious expression.

"The runes on the column maintain the Ministry's internal anti-Apparition and anti-Portkey wards," he explained. "I don't know what your plan is for escaping – or if, indeed, you Gryffindors even bother with actual *plans* – but I



assume our escape will be easier if we can Apparate within the building or, if necessary, outside it."

Peter snorted. "Show-off. By the way, do you know where the DMLE evidence lockup is? I need to get my own wand back. Then, we'll need to make a quick stop at Auror HQ."

"Any other errands we need to run? Perhaps stop for tea and sandwiches?"

The rat Animagus made a face and then headed down the corridor. "I think the most amazing thing about this whole day," he said over his shoulder, "is learning that thirteen years in Azkaban did nothing to rein in your sarcasm."

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Ten minutes later, a much more upbeat Peter Pettigrew exited the DMLE Evidence lockup with his leather satchel over his shoulder, his own wand now back in hand, and three dead DMLE late shift employees in his wake. He was soon distracted from his reverie by a soft squeaking from down below at his feet. It was the albino rat with the mismatched eyes who'd handed Peter a wand back in the elevator. Peter gently picked the rodent up, and the two had a very brief and squeaky conversation. He then turned to Rookwood who was staring at him wide-eyed.

"When I escaped, I used a variant of the Gemino Curse to unleash several rat swarms throughout the building," Peter explained. "Unfortunately, the Aurors exterminated all the other rats on this level except for Socrates here. He says there are now about eight or so people in the Auror Office, though he doesn't think any of them are actual Aurors."

"... *Socrates*?"

"Yes," Peter said defensively. "I've raised him from a pup. He's very smart."

Rookwood continued to stare in amazement until his face broke out into an excited smile.

"You actually did it!" he said in a voice full of wonder and pride. "You solved the problem of morphic resonance! You can interact with rats just as a Parselmouth does with snakes!"

Peter shrugged even as he gently placed Socrates inside his coat pocket. "My control isn't nearly as good as actual Parseltongue. And I can only affect living rats, not magical depictions of them. Anyway, my grandfather did most of the work. I'm sure my father would have figured it out decades ago if only ..."

He trailed off wistfully. Rookwood reached over and squeezed his shoulder reassuringly. "Both Gustav and Martin would have been very proud of you. I hope you realize that."

Peter ducked his head almost bashfully. "Thanks. But we still need to get into Auror HQ. Any brilliant ideas?"

Rookwood started to respond but then froze. His eyes seemed to glaze over for a few seconds, and then, he blinked repeatedly to clear his head.

"Gus?" Peter asked with concern.

"Sorry, sorry," Rookwood answered. "It's just ... the two Aurors I enslaved have broken free from my control."

"They have?" the other Death Eater responded uneasily. Then, the floor beneath them shuddered slightly, and

Rookwood's face broke out into a wide grin.

"Posthumously!" he added. "I believe you'll find that building-wide Apparition is now possible, O King of Rats! How's that for a brilliant idea?"

## Chapter End Notes

Next: Things get worse for James, and a lot of other people as well.

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P\*\*\*\*\*n page and supported my original fiction.

Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2 (What the Sinister Man is reading): Nothing new, I'm afraid.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors: BlueWater5, Bob, Darkarus, FeatheryMinx, feynmanners, Flareix\_ [Prince Flare], IPoke, Krisni, lazinessIsTheMotherOfProgress, LFGB, Luc the Virtual Arm Twister, Magica, onlyonesane, Pivosh(Knight of Ron aka Reg), PrettyPinkCupcake, ProgKingHughesker, RamsesZwei, Rose Ritonya, Sielk, TauNeutrino, TNT, TzarDeRus, and zanrui. Thanks, guys!

AN4: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 14,175. Followers: 14,917. Favorites: 13,097. Communities: 218. Discord followers: Over 3000! Go Team POS!

# **The Fall of the House of Potter (Pt 1)**

## Chapter Notes

### SHAMELESS PLUG!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything. We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### ***Harry Potter and the Death Eater Menace***

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***Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.***

***TRIGGER WARNING: More rats! More death!***

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### ***Chapter 51: The Fall of the House of Potter***

#### ***Meanwhile at Gringotts ...***

As James continued to review the documents and figures Rib-Cracker had provided, he fought a losing battle against panic. Just two nights earlier, he had offered to go to

Azkaban and allow Harry to take over as Lord Potter. Now, he was beginning to wish he'd gone with that earlier plan.

He paused to take another sip of the water the Goblin had provided. Then, he took a second to worry about whether he was being charged for the water and whether he could afford it before he cleared his throat to speak.

"So, Mr. Rib-Cracker, can you ... I mean ..." he trailed off as if completely overwhelmed by events.

James bowed his head and sat quietly for a long pause.

"*What can I do?*" he finally asked in a hollow voice.

Rib-Cracker simply stared at the broken man. "With respect, Lord Potter, I do not believe that I have any helpful advice for you. I have explained the situation. I believe your ... *options* are self-evident. As the hour grows late, perhaps it would be best if you left now and discussed these developments with your family, as they will obviously be ... affected."

"Yes," James said in a flat tone. "I suppose they will be."

Then, he rose and thanked the Goblin with remarkable sincerity before leaving the office without another word. Once outside, he paused to lean against a column for a few minutes. He would later realize that he didn't know exactly *how many* minutes he'd rested there, but he hoped it hadn't been too long. Unfortunately, at that moment, he was having trouble breathing, and his heart was beating at a rate that couldn't possibly be healthy. But under the circumstances, James decided that he simply had too much to do to have a panic attack in the middle of Diagon Alley. Unfortunately, he didn't have any Calming Draughts handy, so he decided to take what seemed to be the next best

option: taking the nearest Floo home to Potter Manor and opening up a bottle of whiskey.

Alas, that plan was swiftly abandoned when a silvery phantasmal cat appeared in the air next to him to deliver horrifying news.

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### ***Back at Auror Headquarters***

To his annoyance, Rufus Scrimgeour now found himself in the small breakroom of the Auror Offices making a pot of tea like a common house elf. He'd reluctantly agreed with Robards that his leg prevented him from following the Aurors either on foot or by broom, and so he'd remained at HQ. The first group of survivors from the rat plague on Level 3 had arrived just a few moments ago, still soaked to the skin, and Scrimgeour had grouchily agreed to fetch something to warm them up.

Meanwhile, Violetta Edgecombe set herself to unlocking the Floo. The Auror Corps had a special staging area for large scale Floo transport operations: a 30x30 room with a massive fireplace against one wall that was large enough for three men to enter at once without needing to duck. Unfortunately, it could only be opened by an active duty Auror, and Robards had neglected to unlock it before leaving in pursuit of Pettigrew. Of course, Edgecombe had the authority to unlock any Floo, but it was apparently a tedious process to bypass Auror security. Edgecombe's husband and the other three civilians (one spouse, one boyfriend, and one "casual friend who'd come as a plus-one") were waiting for Violetta to get the Floo open, while Umbridge spent her time pacing back and forth as she sent a Patronus to warn Cornelius Fudge, Amelia Bones, James Potter, and everyone else she could think about the

situation. Hit wizards Jensen and Eagleton stood guard at the entryway to the Headquarters.

As he poured himself a cup of tea, Rufus focused his considerable intellect on the events of the day. The rat swarm that had targeted the Auror Headquarters had been as unprecedented as it had been alarming, and Rufus's concerns only grew upon learning that other levels of the Ministry had suffered similar attacks. Worse still, it had been over twenty minutes since Gawain and his two trainees had left to investigate the Detention Center.

*"Dammit!"* the man thought to himself uneasily. *"They should have been back by now!"*

So caught up in his worries was Rufus that he almost missed it – the faint ripple in the surface of the tea in his cup that had accompanied a barely detectable tremor that had just passed through the floor. He focused his potent Legilimency on that sensation and immediately intuited the horrible truth: somewhere else in the Ministry there had just been a large explosion! Then, before Rufus could give that any more thought, he was immediately distracted by sounds that should have been impossible in this building: cracks of Apparation.

Quickly, Scrimgeour limped out of the breakroom just in time to hear the unmistakable sounds of two Killing Curses from near the entrance. Instantly, the ex-Auror Disillusioned himself. Carefully, he crept through the maze of Auror cubicles towards the commotion, slowly, for the spell would fail if he moved too fast. He was saddened but not surprised to see that both hit wizards were dead. Then, Scrimgeour grimaced, as he heard voices nearby that he recognized: Pettigrew ... and *Augustus Rookwood*.

*"Damned useless Unspeakable gits!"* he thought angrily.  
*"Here's hoping their arrogance doesn't kill us all!"*

Scrimgeour sneaked closer, as cautiously as possible, until he could just see Pettigrew's back around a corner. Rookwood was next to him but out of view. With lightning speed, Rufus's mind searched through all the spells that he could use from this angle, as he was certain Rookwood would sense him even through his invisibility the moment he stepped into the clear. After an instant of hesitation, he rejected all the spells that would be instantly fatal. He'd made a vow at the end of the last war to avoid killing unless it was an absolute last resort, lest his soul suffer any more than his sins had already earned. And besides, if the rat bastard had killed Gawain Robards and Kingsley Shacklebolt, then Rufus would see that he *suffered* for it.

Rufus also rejected the thought of a Stunning Jinx. He wasn't sure about Rookwood's exact position, but he knew that all Death Eaters were trained to cast Renervation Charms to awaken stunned comrades even in the middle of pitched combat. So, the canny ex-Auror abandoned his invisibility and prepared to put as much power into a wordless Disarming Jinx as he could, to be followed by a Leg Locker (an underappreciated spell as it required a specific counter-jinx that couldn't be cast easily in the heat of battle). As he stepped forward, however, Rufus suddenly noticed an albino rat perched on Pettigrew's shoulder, and the second his Disillusionment failed, it *squealed* loudly.

Rufus's Expelliarmus struck true, sending the other man's wand flying straight into his waiting hand and knocking Pettigrew against the wall. But to the ex-Auror's utter surprise, the albino rat *leaped off the man's shoulder and into the path of the Leg Locker!* The rat fell to the ground partially paralyzed, and with a loud (and, to Rufus, *baffling*)



cry of "*SOCRATES!*" Pettigrew transformed into a second rat that darted under a nearby couch. Scrimgeour had just enough time to summon a puff adder and send it after the cowardly rat before he had to duck a Killing Curse from Rookwood.

Scrimgeour immediately returned Rookwood's fire. To his pleasant surprise, the Umbridge woman (of all people!), emerged from a corridor to take a defensive position behind a desk and get the Death Eater in a crossfire. While Rufus held Rookwood's attention, she hit him in the back with a Jelly Legs Jinx. The Death Eater fell to the floor, but to Rufus's consternation, he managed to Disapparate before either Rufus or Dolores could finish him. He reappeared a second later on the other side of the room and blasted Umbridge's cover with a Reducto that also knocked the witch to the floor unconscious. Then, Rookwood swiftly crawled behind some cover. Rufus responded by summoning a flock of crows to distract the man before Disapparating himself to a better position. A second after he rematerialized, he felt Rookwood's overpowered Finite wash over the room, reversing the Jelly Legs Jinx and vaporizing the attacking crows.

After that, it was a brief but furious duel with two old but powerful wizards continually Apparating around the room while casting curses at one another, each fighting to get the drop on his enemy. At one point, each of the two fired a Lacero at the other, and the two spells met in mid-air, causing their wands to briefly lock as Scrimgeour and Rookwood pitted their magic and wills against one another.

But Rufus knew that he would have to finish this quickly. He had hoped that the snake he conjured would have killed the wandless Pettigrew by now, but that meant relying on luck more than he would ever have considered wise. And so, he

elected to call upon his own inner Gryffindor and use an *absurdly risky* stratagem: he made a point of staring directly into the other man's eyes!

As Scrimgeour anticipated, Rookwood took the opportunity to use a silent Legilimency attack, one that would have been devastating against most opponents. And while Scrimgeour was a natural Legilimens, he was not a devotee of actual psychic combat. Consequently, Rookwood's own Legilimency should have given the Death Eater a decisive victory. But the wily ex-Auror had one special trick up his sleeve.

Rufus Scrimgeour liked to collect secrets.

One of those secrets was his memory of an encounter many decades earlier with a dark wizard named Vasyl Dobroshtan. A Halfblood of Ukrainian descent, Dobroshtan had been expelled from Beauxbatons during his final year for "illegal artistic experimentation." And one of his experiments was a technique for embedding psychic attacks inside artwork designed to magically draw and hold the viewer's undivided attention so that the hidden attack could bypass psychic defenses. In his pursuit of Dobroshtan, Rufus had been exposed to one such image that had been embedded with the concept of unimaginable pain, essentially a Cruciatus Curse conveyed through art. And because of the nature of Dobroshtan's magical creations, the effect was even more pronounced when the image was viewed with Legilimency.

Simply scrutinizing the image for a few minutes had nearly been the death of Rufus. But he survived that experience and brought Dobroshtan to justice. Then, he locked that cursed image away in his memory palace in case it was ever needed. As Rufus felt the tendrils of Rookwood's

Legilimency slither into his mind, he unlocked that terrible memory and thrust it into the forefront of his thoughts.

And Rookwood screamed as Dobroshtan's artistry burned through his mind.

Unable to break the connection or even eye contact, Rookwood could only shriek in agony and drop to his knees as his own Legilimency was turned against him. Scrimgeour edged closer as quickly as possible while maintaining the link with the Death Eater who found himself unable to look away or even blink. With a flick of his wand, Rookwood was disarmed, but still Scrimgeour did not relent. While he had no wish to damage his own soul by killing Rookwood, he was quite prepared to risk some lesser soul damage if he allowed the fiend to inadvertently *kill himself*. And so, he slowly advanced on his enemy, letting Dobroshtan's infernal creation do its work. Already, he could see a rivulet of blood dripping down the man's nose.

*"Just a few more seconds, and we can end this!"* Rufus thought to himself, a sentiment that lasted right up until a brown Norwegian rat bit down on the heel of his good leg hard enough to snap the Achilles tendon. He had an instant to realize that Rookwood's earlier Finite must have been strong enough to dispel the snake as well as the flock of birds, leaving Pettigrew free to sneak up on him. Then, with a scream of his own, the wizard collapsed to the floor even as a terrible burning sensation crept up the bitten leg. Instantly, where the rat had been, there now stood a man bearing a cruelly smug expression. Pettigrew bent down to retrieve Rufus's wand as well as his own.

"Oh dear," Peter said with mock concern. "Now, I seem to have ruined *both* your legs, Professor Scrimgeour! How rude of me!"

"Bastard!" Rufus spat through the pain and, oddly he thought, the discomfort of a sudden raging fever. "Go on and finish it then!"

"I already have, Scrimgeour," the Death Eater said coldly. "You're dead. You just don't know it yet."

The ex-Auror looked at his palsied hands which were already breaking out into pustules. Scrimgeour's head nodded as if he were struggling to stay awake, and when he coughed, he spat out blood. He looked up at Pettigrew with a mixture of shock, fury and, strangely, regret.

*"Damn ... you! S'not ... fair. It's not fair! I had ... plans ... in ...motion."*

"Sometimes, Professor," Peter said sagely, "a plan is just a list of things that don't happen."

Rufus Scrimgeour had no response to that comment. Nor any other.

Nearby, Rookwood took a moment to heal his own injuries and recover a bit from the intense (and *humbling*) psychic trauma before joining his protégé. Peter summoned Rookwood's wand from where it had landed and then returned it to the other man when he drew near.

"What ... what did you do to him?" he asked weakly while still trying to clear his head.

"A blood-borne curse designed to mimic the effects of the Black Death," Peter responded proudly. "It draws on the symbology of rats as the bearers of plague. I can only inflict it once, and then I need to let the symbolic magic recharge for several days before I can use it again. But it's usually

fatal to wizards who don't get immediate medical treatment."

Peter looked back down at the wizard lying at their feet, and then kicked him in the ribs. There was no response. "As Scrimgeour could attest. If, you know, he wasn't dead already. Are you okay? You're sort of ... bleeding."

Rookwood grimaced and then wiped his hand across his mouth to remove the blood that had trickled down from his nose. "I will ... be alright in a few more minutes. But it was an uncomfortably close thing. I did not anticipate Scrimgeour having such a formidable Occlumency trap in his arsenal."

He grunted a laugh. "Let this be a lesson to me, I suppose. I have gone further than anyone alive in the development of Occlumency. And yet, I still find that no defense is perfect. Hopefully, Scrimgeour took whatever technique he just used against me to his grave."

Peter was about to ask for details when both Death Eaters heard a moan coming from nearby. It was Dolores Umbridge, who had regained consciousness and was slowly pulling herself up off the floor. With a lazy sweep of his wand, Peter picked the woman off the floor and dropped her roughly into a nearby chair. She gave out a cry of pain and then looked fearfully at her captors.

"Madame Dolores Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic," Peter said disdainfully. "And would-be hero, apparently. You really should have played it smart and just hid in a closet, I think. **AVADA** ...!"

"WAIT!" Rookwood interrupted sharply.

Instantly, Peter caught himself before completing the curse. Rookwood stared at the frightened woman for several seconds while idly tapping his stolen wand against his temple.

"Umbridge?" he asked mildly, as if the name were familiar and he were trying to place it. "Are you, by any chance, the daughter of Orford Umbridge?"

Dolores tried to answer but was not able to form any coherent words.

"Please do me the courtesy of answering when I speak to you, Madam. You don't wish me to think you rude, now do you?"

She coughed to clear her throat. "Y-yes. I am ... that is ... Orford Umbridge was my father."

Slowly, Rookwood advanced towards her with his wand held up in his right hand as he casually rolled it between his fingers. At no time did he break eye contact. "Was? Is your sainted father no longer with us, Madam Umbridge?"

"He ... he p-passed away last Christmas."

"I'm so sorry for your loss," he said with bland politeness as he continued his advance towards the witch.

"Tell me, Madam Umbridge. What *exactly* does the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic *actually do*?"

She paused to wipe some tears from her eyes, smearing her makeup as she did. "I, um, I advise the Minister on political m-matters. Especially pertaining to Hogwarts." Rookwood's eyes widened slightly, and she continued in a panic as he drew nearer.

"But n-not about anything *important* mind you! Just educational policies! I'm no one special! Really, I'm not! So, there's just *no sense* in killing me! No one would miss me at all! It probably wouldn't even hurt anyone's feelings. So please, Mr. Rookwood. What ... whatever you're thinking of d-doing to me ... just ... *don't! Please!*"

By now, the woman was openly weeping as the feared Death Eater came to a halt standing almost on top of her. Slowly, he raised the index finger of his left hand to rest it on his lips.

"*Shhhh.*"

Then, he gently brought Gawain Robard's wand down so that the tip touched the terrified woman's forehead, and she shut her eyes tightly and waited for the end. Rookwood said nothing, but his face assumed a mask of intense concentration. Slowly, he turned the wand in his hand clockwise against Umbridge's forehead as if he were tightening a resisting screw. Dolores's face scrunched up as if she were in agony, and she opened her mouth to scream. But not a sound came out. Instead, after a few seconds, she simply slumped in the chair unconscious. Rookwood turned back to face Pettigrew, and although he suddenly seemed even more exhausted than after his duel with Scrimgeour, he also looked remarkably smug.

"Was that supposed to accomplish something?" asked a bemused Pettigrew.

Rookwood shrugged. "I saw fertile ground. So, I planted a seed. In time, we will see what takes root. And what *grows.*"

He took a deep breath. "Now, kindly go and fetch whatever we came here to get while I attend to the others still hiding from us."

Peter nodded and quickly made his way to James's office where he promptly blasted the door off its hinges. Once inside, he easily found the picture of the four young Marauders sitting on his friend's desk. He snatched it up and then raced after his mentor.

Soon after, the rat Animagus caught up with Rookwood in the Floo staging room where five witches and wizards were on their knees begging for mercy in front of a still-locked Floo.

"Did you find what you were looking for, Peter?" Rookwood asked without taking his eyes off the prisoners.

Peter paused while considering the hostages and then smirked. "Oh yes. It was *exactly* where James Potter told me it would be!"

Rookwood glanced at the other Death Eater for a second and then smiled as he took the hint. "Ah yes! James Potter has always been such a good friend, hasn't he? Tell me – is it true that James Potter is *also* an illegal Animagus like you?"

Peter gave a fake laugh. "Oh, Gus! You know I'm under an Unbreakable Vow never to reveal anything about that!"

"Oh yes! Silly me!" Rookwood turned his attention back to the prisoners. "Anyway, before you arrived, I was getting to know this lot before I decided whether any of them would be allowed to live."

He pointed to Thomas Edgecombe. "For example, did you know this fellow is the Director of Portkey Regulation? Which means that, with the proper motivation, he can provide us with an untraceable International Portkey!"



"I will never help you Death Eater scum!" Edgecombe said defiantly. "Do you hear me? I will never ..."

**"CRUCIO."**

Immediately, Violetta Edgecombe fell to the floor screaming in response to Rookwood's curse. He released it almost immediately, but her entire body still trembled with the force of her sobbing. Beside her, the other three hostages shrieked in terror at the effects of the Unforgiveable.

"That was five seconds, Mr. Edgecombe," Rookwood said patiently. "If I stop there, she *probably* won't have any lasting neurological damage."

Edgecombe immediately began to beg for mercy for himself and his wife. "Al-alright! Please! Just don't hurt her anymore! I'll do whatever you want!"

"Of course, you will, Edgecombe," Rookwood said calmly. "There was never any doubt."

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### ***Fifteen minutes earlier in front of Gringotts***

"*Chief Auror!*" said the Patronus. "*The Ministry of Magic is under attack by a horde of aggressive rats that multiply as if under the Geminio Charm. Rufus Scrimgeour believes that they are under the control of Peter Pettigrew. I am trapped in the Auror Headquarters with several other civilians. Please help us!*"

The cat Patronus faded away, but for several seconds, James could only stare at the spot where it had been as if something in him had broken. He actually laughed at the absurdity of receiving such a message from a phantasmal cat on top of everything else that had happened today.

"And the hits just keep on coming," he said aloud with a sick grin on his face. After a moment's thought, he realized that the nearest Floo open right now was at the Leaky Cauldron on the opposite end of Diagon Alley. Briefly, he considered Apparating straight there, but after the day he'd had, James felt absolutely certain he'd splinch himself. So he took off at a run, shoving the night-time customers of the Alley out of his way as he went.

Fifteen minutes later, he stepped through the Floo from the Leaky Cauldron into Auror HQ, where he was surprised to find Amelia Bones and two off-duty hit wizards already on the scene and in the process of freeing three hostages (none of whom was Dolores Umbridge).

"What's the situation here?" he asked. "And where's Madam Umbridge?"

"She's been transported to St Mungo's," Director Bones said crisply. "She's presently unresponsive due to some unidentified dark curse. She was lucky, though. Rufus Scrimgeour is *dead*!"

James staggered back, horrified. "Rufus? Dead?! Who ... who is responsible?"

One of the former hostages spoke up through her tears.

"Peter Pettigrew and Augustus Rookwood. They used the Cruciatus on Madam Edgecombe and then Side-Along Apparated both her and Mr. Edgecombe out of here right before Madam Bones arrived."

"Side-Along ...?!" he exclaimed. "That's impossible! There are wards against that!"

"Well not anymore!" spat another former hostage.  
"Rookwood said he was taking the Edgecombes to get an International Portkey!"

Amelia looked sharply at James who didn't even acknowledge her. Instead, he just turned on his heel and Apparated straight down to Level 5 even as she called on him to wait for backup.

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### ***The International Portkey Station Level 5***

While Thomas Edgecombe's office was a part of the Department of Magical Transportation on Level 6, all International Portkeys had to depart from Level 5 for diplomatic reasons, since such Portkeys normally had to be approved by the Department of International Magical Cooperation. Of course, the head of the Portkey Authority could always bypass those restrictions if given a good reason to do so. The Death Eater's wand pointed at his wife certainly counted as a good reason.

Elsewhere, while clearing Levels 3 and 4 of rats, Pius Thicknesse's squad of Aurors and hit wizards had managed to rescue a dozen Ministry personnel, but they'd also come across nearly that many fatalities from Pettigrew's rat plague. They'd also gotten lucky on Level 4 (Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures). Apparently, when the rats hit this level, Dirk Cresswell, Head of the Goblin Liaison Office, had the presence of mind to break into the Pest Advisory Board and commandeer fifty gallons of doxycide stored in a backpack-mounted sprayer. It turned out that while rats hit with doxycide still duplicated, the copies were already fatally poisoned from the moment they sprang into existence. While Cresswell wasn't able to take out the whole

swarm, he was able to slow its advance long enough for the Aurors to arrive and finish the job. More importantly, Cresswell also had a key to the Floo on Level 4, and he was able to open it so that the civilians rescued by Thicknesse's squad could finally leave the building. At the Auror's insistence, all of them went to St Mungo's to be checked out first.

From there, Thicknesse and his party made their way down to Level 5 (International Magical Cooperation), where he was relieved at first to see no immediate signs of rat infestation. He'd actually held out hope that the plague was over. Unfortunately, those hopes were dashed when the Aurors discovered *thousands* of rats filling the open waiting area in front of the International Portkey Departure & Arrival station. On the far side of the waiting area near the Departure gate, Violetta Edgecombe was chained to one of several decorative columns along with the three Ministry employees who oversaw international portkey travel on the weekends.

And floating above Madam Edgecombe and the other hostages were five words in flaming letters conjured by the Pyrologos Charm: FEAR THE KING OF RATS!

Of course, as dramatic as it was, the entire tableaux was rather difficult to see through the spectral Dark Mark that floated in the air over the sea of rats, a sinister green skull and snake image that took up a third of the waiting area and made observation difficult if not terrifying. Inside the station, Pettigrew was mildly annoyed that circumstances prevented him from being more artistic in his approach.

Behind Thicknesse's group, there was a crack of Apparition. Startled, most of the Aurors and hit wizards turned around with their wands ready to fire, and it was lucky that James

Potter wasn't struck down by his own men before he could say a word. He put up his hands to show he was not a threat and then moved to join Thicknesse.

"Status report?" he inquired.

"Not sure, Chief," Thicknesse replied. "We got here just before you did. So far, we've had good luck exterminating the rats as we come across them, but now they're all grouped tight against hostages. We don't know what's going on inside the International Portkey station."

"Well, I can guess," Potter said ruefully. "Pettigrew and Rookwood are in there with Thomas Edgecombe, and they've got him making an illegal International Portkey."

Pius's eyes widened at that information. "So that's why they've put up the Dark Mark! It'll stop us from setting up an Anti-Portkey Jinx!"

"And also from just Apparating inside with them," James added. "They've also taken down the building's internal wards against Apparation, so anyone with a Dark Mark can still Apparate at will!"

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Inside the station, Rookwood oversaw Thomas Edgecombe's work while constantly reminding him of the price his wife would pay for failure or betrayal. Peter stood near the entryway to keep a lookout. Socrates was perched on his shoulder. Pettigrew had another rat in his hand, a chunky grey rat named Templeton to whom he was idly feeding a small hunk of cheese. Then, he was distracted by a soft squeak at his feet. It was yet another rat, a small black female named Dock. Sadly, Hickory and Dickory hadn't survived the evening's events.

Peter picked up Dock and spoke to her for several seconds before placing her into a coat pocket. Then, he turned back towards his fellow Death Eater.

"The Aurors are here. James is with them. Time?"

"About a minute," Rookwood answered. "Maybe two."

Peter nodded. "So, a distraction then, I reckon," he said as he raised his wand to activate the Sonorous Charm.

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"How can he even do all this?" Dawlish asked rhetorically. "Cast a Duplication Curse on living animals? And control them all to this degree?"

"I think it must have been something to do with him being ..." James suddenly stopped in mid-sentence, almost to the point of biting his tongue.

"What?" one of the hit wizards asked. "Is he really a rat Animagus? I've heard rumors!"

"Me too," said another. "Did you know he was an illegal Animagus, Chief Potter?"

James winced while Pius and the other Aurors present diplomatically looked away. The fact that Pettigrew had been held in an Animagus-proof cell had been classified above the security rating of a standard hit wizard. Before any of the Aurors could respond, an amplified voice called out from the office and across the waiting area.

"HELLO, JAMES POTTER!" Peter called out. "HAVE I FINALLY GOTTEN YOUR ATTENTION?"

James grimaced and activated the Sonorous Charm himself. "I'M HERE, PETER. I'M THE ONE YOU WANT. LET THOSE PEOPLE GO AND YOU CAN HAVE ME AS A HOSTAGE INSTEAD!"

There was a brief hesitation. "DO YOU MEAN THAT, JAMES? YOU'RE VOLUNTEERING TO BE MY HOSTAGE?"

"YES! IF YOU'LL LET THE OTHERS GO!"

Thicknesse grabbed James by the shoulder. "What are you doing?!" he hissed quietly. James quickly deactivated his Sonorous.

"I'm trying to stall him before he and Rookwood get away. If I can just get close to him, maybe I can distract them long enough for you lot to bypass the Dark Mark and get an Anti-Portkey ward up!"

"They'll *kill* you, Chief!" Savage exclaimed.

James simply looked at the female Auror. He had no answer for that. He wasn't even sure at the moment whether he'd consider that a bad outcome. Certainly, a heroic death here and now might simplify matters for his family later on. Before anyone else could speak, Peter spoke again.

"VERY WELL, JAMES. IF YOU'RE SERIOUS - HEHEH, NO PUN INTENDED - THEN I WANT YOU TO WALK FORWARD TO THE MIDDLE OF THE ROOM. RIGHT UP TO THE EDGE OF MY LORD'S MARK. MY FURRY LITTLE FRIENDS WILL LET YOU PASS. BUT IF YOU TRY ANY FUNNY BUSINESS, I START KILLING HOSTAGES!"

"I UNDERSTAND," James answered. "I'M COMING OUT!"

With that, James Potter stepped from around the cover the Aurors and hit wizards had been using. As he slowly walked forward, the living carpet of rats parted before him to open a path. The vermin continued to do so until he was halfway across the waiting area, about fifty feet from the other Aurors. The ghostly image of a skull with a snake crawling from its mouth towered over him. Meanwhile, the rats swarmed around behind him until he stood alone in a circle no more than ten feet across, a small vulnerable island amid a sea of chittering teeth and claws.

James swallowed deeply and whispered a mantra to himself repeatedly. *"I am a Gryffindor. I am a Gryffindor."*

"THAT'S FAR ENOUGH, JAMES. NOW ... TAKE OFF YOUR COAT AND TOSS IT TO THE RATS!"

"What?" James called, no longer under the Sonorous Charm. "I don't understand ...!"

"**CRUCIO.**" There was a flash of red light and one of the hostages screamed in agony.

"STOP!" James screamed even as he desperately unbuckled his red Auror's long coat and threw it forward. The curse ended, and the poor man stopped screaming, although his weeping continued. Nearby, to James's surprise, several of the rats grabbed his coat in their teeth, and they swiftly dragged it into the office.

"NICE! NOT MY SIZE EXACTLY, BUT IT'LL MAKE A LOVELY SOUVENIR!" James could almost hear the sneer in his old friend's voice. "NOW DO THE SAME TO YOUR WAND!"

Despite himself, James hesitated just long enough for one of the other hostages to feel the lash of the Cruciatus. Then,



he swiftly threw his wand towards the entryway to the station. Another rat picked up the wand from the floor and darted into the office with it.

"Okay!" James called out. "I've done what you asked! Now just ... let the others go! You can do whatever you want to me!"

"WHAT I WANT IS TO HURT YOU, JAMES. AND AS I SAID, I STILL HAVE LOTS OF WAYS TO DO SO!"

And then, James heard a sound that stabbed at his heart. It was the sound of a thin shaft of wood ("*Mahogany. 11 inches with a dragon heartstring core. Pliable, and excellent for Transfiguration, Mr. Potter.*") being snapped in two.

Behind James, several of the Aurors gasped in shock. In wizarding culture, there were few taboos more sacred than "*Thou shalt not snap another wizard's wand.*" It was a punishment reserved for the worst of the worst, for those unfit for wizarding society. For half a second, James wondered if having his wand snapped was a karmic punishment for that drunken Howler in which he'd threatened to do the same to Harry.

"Okay, Peter!" James called out even as he struggled to control his fury. "Are you happy now that you've done that? Is there anything else you have left to take from me?"

Inside the station, Peter glanced over to Rookwood who mouthed back the words "*Ten seconds.*" Then, he called out once more to his former friend.

"JUST ONE MORE THING, JAMES! CHANGE!"

"What?!" James asked in confusion. "What do you mean ... *change*?!"

"I MEAN, PRONGS, THAT I'M GOING TO COUNT DOWN FROM FIVE AND THEN START KILLING HOSTAGES ... UNLESS YOU CHANGE! RIGHT HERE! RIGHT NOW! IN FRONT OF ALL THOSE AURORS AND HIT WIZARDS! DO YOU UNDERSTAND NOW, PRONGS?"

James's eyes went wide. Then, he turned back to look at Thicknesse and the other Aurors and hit wizards who all watched him with confused expressions.

"FIVE!"

James felt pure despair writhing in the pit of his stomach. There really was no end to Peter's ability to hurt him.

"FOUR!"

It seemed the betrayer could even take one of the proudest achievements of James's entire life and turn it into a humiliation.

"THREE!"

James steeled himself knowing what would happen next. He would change, and the whole world would know the truth. That he was an illegal Animagus. That he had *been* an illegal Animagus the whole time he'd been an Auror.

"TWO!"

And worst of all, everyone would know at once that *James had known about Peter's Animagus form!* Known about it and kept quiet except to tell a few trusted Aurors about the need for Anti-Animagus wards on Peter's cell! Known about

it but *never guessed* what else an Animagus could do even with a form as weak as a pathetic little *rat*!

"ONE!"

Before Peter could cast his curse, James fell forward, stretching his arms out as he did. In the blink of an eye, his arms and legs became powerful hooves even as antlers sprouted from his head. James Potter was gone. Prongs stood in his place.

"Merlin's bones!" said someone behind him. "Potter's an Animagus too! Did any of you guys know about this?"

The excited muttering of Aurors and hit wizards was soon overcome by the booming laughter of the traitor.

"HAHAHA! AS MAGNIFICENT AS I RECALL, JAMES! IT WAS WORTH IT ALL TO SEE THAT STAG ... *ONE FINAL TIME!*"

Then, Peter let out a deafening squeal, and in response, the vast swarm of rats frenzied and attacked both the hostages and the stag. Pius and those with him surged forward, targeting the sea of rats and trying to summon the hostages to safety. But before they could draw near – and before James could do anything to save himself – there was a massive explosion from inside the International Portkey station. A fireball tore through the columns from which the hostages were restrained, and then, the shockwave struck the stag and hurled him the length of the room. Prongs felt a sharp pain in its front leg and reflexively changed back to James Potter ... who had just a moment to wonder if he should be more worried about the rats clinging to his body or the fact that his right arm was bent at a wholly unnatural angle before the universe finally showed him some mercy and he passed out.

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***The Minister's Private Office***  
***9:20 p.m.***

"Twenty-three fatalities, James," Minister Fudge said with barely concealed fury. "Twenty. Three. Fatalities. Including two Senior Aurors, the Director of Portkey Regulation and his wife, and your own predecessor as Chief Auror!"

James winced at his boss's ire. He was still recovering from his own injuries. Though quick work by Healers from St Mungo's had repaired the actual damage, he was still in considerable pain, a side effect of changing forms with a broken limb. The non-physical damage was far worse, of course. On top of the financial losses James had only just learned about hours earlier, Peter Pettigrew had also utterly humiliated James in front of his own men and snapped his wand for good measure. The man wondered how far he had left to fall before hitting rock bottom. And then, Cornelius Fudge began to yell some more, and James assumed that question might be answered soon enough.

"And that's just the loss of life! Those Death Eater swine - which *your department* allowed to escape - blew up both the International Portkey Station *and* a runic array that has been protecting this Ministry from unauthorized Apparation entry for over two centuries! It will cost *millions* of galleons to repair all that! Millions of galleons the government *can't spare right now!*"

The Minister fixed James with a steely glare. "And so, James, I hope I can count on House Potter to provide the necessary funding for those repairs *since it was your Seneschal who caused all that damage in the first place!*"

James opened his mouth to reply but then gave up and simply nodded his assent.

*"Might as well volunteer to pay Wormtail's tab," he thought to himself. "At least that way, maybe I'll be spared the indignity of people learning I willingly signed an indemnity agreement that requires me to pay the damages whether I want to or not!"*

"I'll ... I'll need to consult with the Goblins about funding, Cornelius ... Minister Fudge," James finally said. "But I'll ... I'll do my best to set things right."

"Set things right!" Fudge scoffed. "As if that's even possible at this point! It's been *less than twelve hours* since I announced to the Wizengamot and the nation that the Azkaban Crisis was resolved and that the Death Eater Menace had been dealt with! And in that time, *your* closest friend who is also your Seneschal and *a secret Death Eater*, has escaped our custody, freed You-Know-Who's most dangerous servant, and caused a full-scale terrorist incident in the very heart of our Ministry! How do you plan to *set that right*, James?!"

James opened his mouth to answer but then closed it again without speaking. He honestly didn't know what to say.

Fudge sat back down in his chair in exhaustion. The two men sat in silence for a moment while James waited to see which ax would fall next.

"Oh, and on top of everything else ... you're an illegal Animagus! Honestly, James!"

James sighed. "I am an Animagus. The ... *legality* of it is kind of up in the air. I'd always believed that it was something I mastered as a student just through hard work

and natural giftedness. I have only recently learned ... that I was press-ganged into it somehow by Unspeakables as part of a secret project carried out during my Hogwarts days."

Fudge stared at him dully. "A secret project? Run by the Unspeakables? At Hogwarts?"

James's face flushed as Fudge pointed out the absurdity of his story, a story he himself wasn't sure of. "It's something else for which my memories have been tampered with, Minister. You should probably ask Saul Croaker if you want to know more."

"If *I* want to know? Surely, if what you say is true, then *you* should be the one demanding answers from the Unspeakables! You know, since evading the Conscriptio List is a crime that carries a *minimum* six-month term in Azkaban!"

James didn't answer. He knew imprisonment over his Animagus form was a possibility, but he wasn't really that worried about it. After all, there were other charges floating around now thanks to Pettigrew that might well land him in Azkaban for longer than six months.

Fudge stared at him before he resumed speaking, now in a gentler voice.

"James, it pains me to say this. It truly does. But there simply *must* be an inquiry over all this. In addition to your association with Pettigrew for all these years, I am informed that you met with him *just today mere hours before his escape!* And you put up silencing wards so no one could know what you two discussed. You *must* see how bad this all looks, my boy."

James nodded but again said nothing. Fudge leaned back slowly in his chair.

"Then, I assume you must also see that you *cannot* continue on as Chief Auror. Even ignoring the scandal this incident has created, you must see how your missteps have devastated morale and caused you to lose the support of your fellow Aurors."

The other man's expression was pained but resolute. "I understand, Minister. You'll have my letter of resignation before I leave tonight."

"I'm afraid I'll require more than that, James. Until there has been a full inquiry into this disaster, I am asking you to step down from the Corps effective immediately. After a few months, if the inquiry shows you to be blameless and the press has died down a bit, we can see about sliding you back into the Corps in some other role. Or failing that, into some other sort of Ministry role. You will be conscripted, after all, even if not as an Auror. And you were very a good Auror, James. Perhaps the mistake was mine in promoting you too fast."

James blinked rapidly as he fought to keep his composure. "I ... I'm sorry I let you down, sir. Is there ... anything else, Minister? I have a letter to write."

"No, that will be all. And James? I regret that it happened this way."

"So do I, Minister," said the disgraced ex-Auror. "So do I."

With that, James rose to leave the Minister's office. As he opened the door, he found Amelia Bones waiting on the other side. There was a terse exchange of pleasantries, and then he stepped past her and left. The DMLE Director

stepped into the Minister's office where she gave her report of the night's events and he advised her of how the meeting with James had gone.

"So give it to me straight, Amelia. What's the likelihood of tracking down Pettigrew and Rookwood?"

"Barring a miracle, nonexistent," she replied. "We've been able to piece together – literally – that the Portkey they used took them to somewhere in Europe, but that's it. We've put out an alert to every European DMLE agency, but at this point, unless the escapees do something stupid to draw attention to themselves, they'll be hard to trace. And clearly, neither of them is stupid."

"Agreed. So here's the big question: Do you think they will be able to get in contact with You-Know-Who?"

Amelia stiffened in her chair. "The Ministry's official position since 1981 has been that You-Know-Who was destroyed, Minister."

"And yet, Amelia, you can't bring yourself to say his name any more than I can. I know the Ministry's official position. Now answer the question."

She removed her monocle and idly polished it with the hem of her sleeve. "You know as well as I that it's simply not a question we can answer. *If* You-Know-Who survived, then he did so through magical means unknown to us that allow him to continue to exist without a physical body. *Merely speculating* about how he might still be alive can attract unhealthy attention from the Unspeakables. So no, I have absolutely no idea as to whether either Pettigrew or Rookwood has the means to get in contact with You-Know-Who assuming that it's even possible to do so."



With that, she changed the topic. "By the way, since we've mentioned the Unspeakables, you should know that there may well be something to Potter's claim to have learned Animagery under their guidance. After hearing about his Animagus form, I made some inquiries, and promptly received a rather stern memo from Saul Croaker advising me that there is indeed a '*secret Animagus registry*' and that Potter is on it. But they won't say anything else about the topic, least of all who else is on the damned thing."

Fudge snorted. "Aside from probably half the Unspeakables themselves! So, if Potter is not *technically* an illegal Animagus, we can't hold the threat of prosecution over him for that."

"You're actually serious about seeking to prosecute the father of the Boy-Who-Lived for his role in tonight's events?"

"You mean for the crimes committed by the *godfather* of the Boy-Who-Lived? That were, at a minimum, facilitated by Potter's incompetence if not worse? I realize, of course, that there's little chance of a conviction, but hopefully, the threat of it will force Potter to open up his family's coffers to pay for Pettigrew's damages. Plus, playing hardball with Potter might improve my standing with the new Lords Black and Wilkes."

Bones nodded. "Well, if that's the way you want to play it, we should probably contact Gringotts first thing in the morning and put a hold on all the Potter vaults for the time being."

"Can we do that?" Fudge asked in surprise. "To an Ancient and Noble House?"

"*You can, Praetor Maximus!* Your authority extends to any actions needed to resolve the so-called Death Eater Menace. During the last war, it was perfectly common to demand reparations even from Ancient and Noble families for damages caused by family members who turned out to be Death Eaters, especially when the Minister did so in lieu of prosecution. Under your Praetor Maximus authority, I've no doubt you can extend that to the situation of a Seneschal and Proxy as well."

"Good idea," Fudge said. Then, he hesitated. "You understand why I *don't* want to continue on as Praetor Maximus, I hope."

"Of course, Minister. But the public backs your policies, as does the clear majority of the Wizengamot. I think you have a while before the downsides of Praetor Maximus become an issue."

And there were downsides. For one thing, the motion to confer the title of Praetor Maximus had been made by *Peter Pettigrew at James Potter's direction*, which only heightened the embarrassment to Fudge's administration that Pettigrew turned out to be a traitor and Potter (Fudge's choice for Chief Auror) had been too witless to see it.

More important, however, was the danger the position itself posed to Fudge. He had and would now continue to have plenary powers over anything having to do with escaped Death Eaters, but only in that area. But the price Fudge paid for such authority was increasing vulnerability in other arenas. Normally, a sitting Minister could only be removed by a No Confidence vote supported by 67% of the Wizengamot. However, beginning one year after imposition of Praetor Maximus (i.e. on August 1, 1994), a No

Confidence vote would pass with only 60%. And beginning a year after *that*, only 51% was required! In other words, a protracted failure to recapture Rookwood and Pettigrew would lead to a situation where Fudge could be removed from office by a bare majority of the Wizengamot.

"And look on the bright side," Amelia continued. "The Quidditch World Cup will be held on these shores in just a few months. While it's obviously bad that Pettigrew and Rookwood are on the loose, the damage they did to the Ministry tonight clearly shows why there's a heightened need to improve security. I feel confident you can get away with taking control of the planning for the Cup on that basis."

Fudge snorted. "Get it out of Ludo's hands before he cocks it up, you mean? Yes, I suppose that's a possibility."

He shook his head and decided to change the subject.

"You know, James's resignation leaves an opening for Chief Auror. And after tonight, the only Senior Auror left is Pius Thicknesse, who's only been in that spot for less than a year. Speaking as a former Auror yourself, do you think he's ready for the Chief Auror's job?"

She considered the matter. "No. Perhaps in a few years. But to be honest, while I like Pius and think he's a fine Auror, he doesn't seem to show much administrative skill. On the other hand, I can't think of anyone presently within the Corps who would do any better."

Fudge reached into a side drawer to remove a bottle of whiskey and two glasses. "What about someone *formerly* within the Corps?"

Amelia watched the Minister carefully as he filled both glasses. "If you're referring to Alastor Moody ..."

"I'm not, and you know it, Amelia. You were a Senior Auror when I came on as Minister. And if you were *still* a Senior Auror when Rufus was injured, I might well have picked you over James."

"Instead, I took the DMLE Directorship soon after your election because *you* asked me to. And my suspicion has always been that you only offered it to me to clear a Senior Auror slot for James in the first place."

Fudge shook his head. "Your suspicions were wrong. You were eminently qualified to head the DMLE, Amelia, and you've done exemplary work in the post. And since the job is co-equal in our management structure with the Chief Auror position, it was effectively a promotion, as I'm sure you realize. Granted, I may have picked James to replace you for political reasons, but you earned your current job on the merits."

She reached over and took one of the two whiskey glasses. "If I earned that job on the merits, then why do you want me to leave it now?"

The Minister chuckled. "Don't be coy. I'm asking you to transfer laterally to another job of equal importance and for which you're eminently qualified, but which simply has different demands. And one you've just admitted has no other viable candidates."

Amelia took a swig of whiskey and exhaled sharply. "Alright, then, Cornelius. As always, I serve at the Minister's pleasure. So, who do you see replacing me at DMLE?"

He shrugged. "I was about to ask you that."

The woman grimaced as if what she was about to say already left a bad taste in her mouth.

"Well, sadly, the *obvious* choice was Rufus Scrimgeour, but he was one of tonight's casualties. Of the *living* candidates ..." She hesitated. "If I had to decide right now, I can only think of one person in the DMLE who has the breadth of experience, the magical ability, and the political acumen for the job."

"Really? So, what's wrong with this one person that has you dancing around his or her name even though it's your first choice?"

"It's a *he*, Cornelius. The current head of the Improper Use of Magic office ... who, unfortunately, happens to have a Dark Mark tattooed on his left arm. Is that a good enough reason for reticence?"

"That depends. Isn't your prospective candidate among those accused Death Eaters who were put under the Imperius Curse by Marcellus Frump? Or at least, according to the evidence you yourself delivered this morning to the whole nation?"

Her grimace deepened. "He is. But from what I've heard of the man and his family connections, I'm not sure Frump had to try *very hard* to Imperius him into joining the Death Eaters."

"I understand why he's ... problematic, Amelia. But since the end of the war, has he given reason to think that he might still be a traitor? Or even a Pureblood bigot to the degree that it would interfere with DMLE activities?"

She sulked for a moment. "No," she finally said. "His record has been *annoyingly* clean and his job performance

exemplary."

"Alright then," Fudge said amiably. "While you're at Gringotts in the morning, I'll pay him a visit to discuss his promotion! And we'll both have to keep an eye on him for any latent Death Eater sympathies."

The Minister took another sip of whiskey. "And honestly, after what we've just been through with James Potter, how bad could *Corban Yaxley* be?"

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### ***The Department of Mysteries*** ***10:00 p.m***

Control shuddered at the sound of one of his oldest friends and longest-serving comrades screamed in absolute agony. But protocols were protocols. Number Nine had spent hours exploring the mindscape of Augustus Rookwood and confirmed to the Oversight Committee that the traitor's mind was utterly destroyed. Twenty-four hours later, his "expert opinion offered as Director of the Mind Division" was dramatically rebutted when Rookwood, apparently in complete control of his faculties, took part in a two-man assault on the Ministry that represented the single worst internal security breach in its history. Even in the worst days of the Death Eater Insurrection, the wizarding government had never suffered anything close to *two dozen* deaths in just a few hours right in the heart of the Ministry.

When Chime 53 activated, the Department of Mysteries went into Lockdown, and the Unspeakables onsite could do nothing except wait ... and flinch nervously every time the chime sounded again. Well, that wasn't *quite* accurate. The Unspeakables probably could have done a great deal to

assist in the fight against Rookwood and Pettigrew. But the Code 53 protocols were in place for a reason, and so swift had been the two Death Eaters rampage through the facility that the two had already escaped before the time the Lockdown could be terminated.

That left the Unspeakables with nothing to do but damage control.

Already, the Creatures Division had called in every member and put them on emergency assignment to figure out *What The Hell* allowed Pettigrew to not only communicate with and control rats but also use the Geminio Curse on them. Control's immediate assumption was that obviously Gustav Kleinwuchs had left a lot more research for Pettigrew to find than the Unspeakables had realized. Their "arrangement" with the war criminal obligated them to set the Death Wolf up with a fake identity in exchange for all of his lycanthropy research. Obviously, Control's predecessors had been foolish to ignore his family's long record of research into Animagery. And only Merlin himself probably knew what other forbidden knowledge had somehow been passed from Kleinwuchs to the grandson who'd been merely an infant when he died.

On a semi-related note, Control was also chagrined by the exposure of the classified Animagus registry to Amelia Bones. Control's immediate instinct was to deny everything, burn James Potter, and let the arrogant sod be sent to Azkaban as an illegal Animagus. But Croaker had pointed out that allowing the father of Jim Potter and Harry Black to be removed from the board might lead to problems later. And in any case, Albus Dumbledore was, of course, aware of the truth behind Potter's Animagery and would never permit him to be convicted for it. Still, it rankled that information that had been deemed an Unspeakable secret

four centuries earlier was now known to the Minister for Magic, which meant it would probably be written up in the *Prophet* by the end of the week.

Nine screamed again. Control winced at the sound of it. Then, he closed his eyes in concentration and mentally reduced his capacity for empathy by 40% before opening his eyes to continue observing the psychic interrogation. He felt badly for Nine's circumstances. Every member of the Division of Mind was presently encircling their Director with their hands clasped together as they connected in a Stage 4 mind-link. From that gestalt vantage point, they were now subjecting Nine to a level 7 deep-scan while they reviewed his memories of the Rookwood interrogation. The process was clearly agonizing for Nine, but Control's guilt was ameliorated by the fact that Nine himself had devised the protocol and insisted that it be implemented immediately upon learning of Rookwood's revival.

To his credit, *no one* took psychic security more seriously than Number Nine. Truly, he would be missed greatly by the DoM if the same protocols he had created turned out to be the death of him.

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***Hogwarts***  
***10:30 p.m.***

After leaving the Ministry, James contacted Albus Dumbledore by Floo and asked to step through to his office. The two men had a brief meeting in which James relayed the evening's developments to the horrified Headmaster. After observing James's demeanor, a worried Dumbledore offered the man a Calming Draught which he gratefully accepted. Then, James made his apologies and said that he needed to meet with his wife.



Ten minutes later, Lily opened her door to find James on the other side bearing a hangdog expression. She frowned as he stepped into the room.

"It's late, James. I was expecting you hours ago. If you've decided *now* is the best time to yell at me over what Harry did at the Wizengamot, I'd really rather put it off until the morning if it's all the same."

For a second, he looked at his wife in confusion before he remembered that business from much earlier in the day with Harry and Sirius. It felt like it had happened years before.

"Oh, no. It's not that. I just ... well ..." His mouth trembled. "I don't know where else to go."

Lily's eyes widened as she suddenly noticed how pale he was. And that he had rips and a few bloodstains on his shirt.

"Oh Merlin! What's happened?" Lily asked. In response, he let out high-pitched laugh and then wiped his eyes. She led him over to a couch and sat beside him.

"What's ... happened?" he asked. "What a question, Lily-Flower. What *hasn't* happened today?"

He paused to take a deep breath.

"Peter's escaped. And he took Rookwood with him. They've fled the country, it seems. In the process, they killed about two dozen people at the Ministry, including Kingsley, Gawain, and Rufus Scrimgeour."

Lily gasped in horror, as James continued. "And they also did several millions of galleons of damage to the Ministry

building. Damage that I expect I'll have to pay for. Oh, and he snapped my wand."

"But why?"

"Honestly, I think he did it just for laughs."

"No, dammit!" she said in exasperation. "*Why* would you have to pay for millions in damages caused by Peter?!"

James shrugged. "Because I'm an idiot? It's not important. What is important is you and the boys. Well, the one boy we still have at least."

He reached over and took Lily's hands in his own.

"Tomorrow morning, I want you to get a solicitor. Ask Harry if you can use his. That would probably be best. But get a solicitor ... and start divorce proceedings against me as soon as possible. Invoke all the Clause 19 penalties you can. If you reveal that I used the Imperius on Jim, you should be able to claim nearly everything I own that's not entailed. Of course, all entailed property will go to Jim anyway once I've been sentenced to Azkaban."

"... *AZKABAN*?!"

"Change your name back to Evans, too! When I met Sirius today, he invoked the Oath of Enmity against House Potter, but you and Harry should be fine together if you're an Evans. You might have to keep Jim and Harry apart, but I didn't reciprocate the oath. Once I'm out of the picture, I think Sirius will allow the oath to lapse rather than just take it out on Jim."

"James, slow down!" Lily exclaimed. "What's gotten into you?!"

"I can't *slow down*, Lily!" James responded urgently. "We have to move *fast*! Or else you and Jim will lose *everything*! Let me have this one chance to fix things! To finally do something *right*!"

"Dammit, James!" she snapped. "You're doing it again! Rushing around making plans with no forethought and keeping me completely in the dark! Whatever happens in the future, right now, *I'm your wife*! So, act like a husband should and tell me what's going on! Why do you think we're going to *lose everything*? What did you do that's so awful you think going to Azkaban would be an acceptable alternative?!"

James leaned back against the sofa and closed his eyes. A tear rolled down his cheek for him to wipe away. "I trusted Peter."

She scoffed. "We *both* trusted Peter, James. So did lots of other people."

The man barked out another broken laugh. "No, Lily. We *both* trusted Peter to be our Secret Keeper. But *I* was the one who trusted him with *our vaults*!"

Lily's eyes widened. "*Jesus wept*," she muttered softly. "How much did he get?"

"More than enough."

"*JAMES!*"

James wiped his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Okay. First of all, he's been skimming from the main Potter accounts for years and hiding the withdrawals. On paper, we have around twenty-five million in liquid assets. The

actual number is closer to nineteen million, of which I owe Harry eleven million due to an Unbreakable Vow."

"Okay, that's ... that's bad," Lily said. "But it still leaves eight million. It's a big hit, but lots of people get by on a lot less than that. Plus, we have all the real estate."

James shook his head sadly. "Over the last three years, ever since he's had oversight on the Charitable Trust ..."

"Oh, don't tell me!" Lily interrupted, her anger rising. "Don't tell me he's been stealing from that charity I ran without issue or complaint for ten years!"

"Worse. He's mortgaged every bit of real estate we own for *more* than it's actually worth, with both the Trust *and* me personally signed on as guarantors of any unsecured balance on the debts. The cash he got for the loans has already been siphoned off, and there are massive balloon payments due on all those debts this summer. If I can't pay the debt off personally, then the Charitable Trust will be on the hook for the balance. And since I stupidly signed all the paperwork for that, as far as the law is concerned, I'm guilty of embezzling from a charitable organization. That's five to seven years in Azkaban."

"But it wasn't your fault!"

"*I signed everything*, Lily. There's no evidence to prove that I wasn't involved. My *defense*, such as it is, is that I was *too stupid* to read all the papers Peter gave me before I signed them."

He sighed dejectedly. "Just like I didn't read the paperwork which requires House Potter to indemnify Peter Pettigrew personally for any financial penalties or civil damages he incurs under any circumstances. I believe I mentioned just

now how he did millions of galleons worth of damage to the Ministry building on his way out. Fudge already told me that House Potter will be held responsible for those damages ... right before he fired me. Well, asked me to resign. Same thing, really."

By now, Lily was simply staring at her husband aghast, with her hand over her mouth.

"How ... how much is left? Can you even afford to pay Harry?"

James shook his head. "Not all of it. If I liquidate everything that's not entailed and pay every other debt House Potter owes, I'll still be short around four million on what I owe Harry. That's why you need to start divorce proceedings immediately!"

She shook her head. "How is it going to help solve *anything* if I leave you and take most of your wealth?"

"It will help you and Jim because, under Wizengamot law, marriage contract penalty claims take precedence over all other debts. If you clean me out, neither our creditors nor the Ministry will be able to take anything from you for either Peter's crimes or my mistakes. I'll even testify about how you were cut off from all our financial dealings. And even as Lily Evans, you'll still be able to act as Regent for Jim until he's old enough to become Lord Conditional when he turns 15. House Potter will survive and under your guidance, I know it can rebuild. I think we both know what a disaster I've been as Lord Potter anyway. I know you'll be able to get things back on track."

"While you rot away in Azkaban for years?!" Lily shrieked. James just smiled, as if all his cares were over.

"I doubt it will be an issue, Lily-Flower. I won't be able to pay Harry what I owe him, which means I'll break an Unbreakable Vow. Assuming it doesn't kill me outright, I'll at least lose my magic. And no squib has ever lasted more than two weeks in Azkaban."

"*STOP IT!*" she shouted suddenly and loudly enough to surprise her husband. "Just *stop* talking like that! You will *not* give up, James Potter! I forbid it!"

"Lily-Flower..."

"*DON'T YOU LILY-FLOWER ME, BUSTER!*" By that point, the woman had shot up to her feet, and her eyes flashed dangerously.

"Now you listen to me, James Charlus Potter! I know you think you're Godric Gryffindor Reborn, and there's nothing you'd like better than the chance to make some grand sacrifice for your family! *But it's not going to happen!* If you wanted to give up on your life, you should have bloody well done so back when I thought you were an arrogant *toe-rag!* Because Merlin help me, after fifteen years of marriage, you have become someone ... someone I can't live without! I LOVE you, you stupid oaf! And you have a son who not only loves you too, he *idolizes* you! And it would *devastate him* to lose you!"

She paused for breath while James stared up at her, almost awestruck by her outburst. Lily sat back down beside him and squeezed his hand.

"And what's more, James, you have *another* son. He might not be your son under the law. And he might not want to think of himself as your son. In fact, to be honest, he would be completely justified in hating you and me both. And yet, somehow, despite his upbringing – and due to what I can

only describe as a *divine miracle* – Harry Black is a *good person*. He is compassionate and brave and has a will of iron. And I genuinely believe that if we can speak to him and explain what has happened, he will be willing to help us despite the Oath of Enmity."

James winced at the name Harry Black despite himself.  
"And if he won't?"

"If Harry won't help us, *then* you can make a big show of walking up to the guillotine and giving a speech like Sydney Carton, but not before!"

"I have no idea who Cindy Cardigan is," he said with a furrowed brow. Lily sighed.

"And if you *do* survive this, I'm going to *force you* to read Muggle novels for the rest of your life. And give book reports on them!" She sighed. "But right now, you need some rest. In the morning, we'll sit down with Jim and explain what's happened. I gather he had an argument with Harry because of the Oath of Enmity, and he needs to understand about that. And, I suppose everything else."

James nodded wanly and then looked around the room. "I, um, don't have a wand to Apparate. And I'd rather not wake Albus up to use his Floo. Is it okay if I stay here and sleep on your couch?"

"No," Lily replied.

"Oh," he said, crestfallen. But then, Lily leaned over and kissed him gently on the lips.

"You can come to bed ... husband," she said.

And he did.

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***The offices of the Daily Prophet  
Just after midnight***

**PANDEMONIUM AND PLAGUE AT MINISTRY!  
ROOKWOOD ESCAPES WITH AID OF "THE KING OF  
RATS"!  
IS CHIEF AUROR POTTER RESPONSIBLE?**

Barnabas Cuffe chortled with delight as he carefully handled the mock-up Page One for the next morning's *Sunday Prophet*.

"This is bloody amazing stuff, Rita!" he exclaimed. "I don't see how Fudge survives this!"

"He will," Rita Skeeter said confidently. "He's more politically astute than his detractors like to believe. More importantly, he can easily scapegoat James Potter for this. Mind you, is it really scapegoating if the goat in question really is at fault?"

Cuffe looked up at his star reporter quizzically. "Yeah, I was wondering about that. I couldn't help noticing that your coverage comes down on Potter pretty hard. You've always given him a soft touch in the past."

"Oh, what can I say, Barney! I guess I was just taken in by that Potter Charm. But now, the scales have fallen from my eyes, and I see the Potters for what they are. A vain mediocre wizard and a gold-digging witch who've both used their son's fame to elevate themselves far above where their talent and character should have led them."

"Careful, Rita, dear. They're still the parents of the Boy-Who-Lived. Despite all that Parselmouth business from last year, Jim Potter's still the idol of Wizarding Britain. And the



public might turn on you if you kick over too many Potter-shaped rocks and expose what's underneath."

"Au contraire, Barney," Rita said while rising from her chair. "When Jim Potter's fans realize how his *loving parents* have endangered his life by letting the King of Rats have unfettered access to him all these years, they'll love me all the more for rescuing him from such shoddy parenting."

She reached into her purse for an envelope she handed to her editor.

"Which reminds me. Here! This is my official notice. My contract says I have to give it to you in advance of any lengthy sabbatical from work. I'll be staying on through the end of June but in a reduced capacity. Then, I'm taking off for the whole summer."

"What?!" Cuffe shrieked, as the reporter headed for the door. "The biggest scandal to hit Wizarding Britain since the fall of You-Know-Who, and *you want to take a sabbatical?! And during the Quidditch World Cup? For what?*"

She turned back to him from the doorway and gave a predatory smile.

"I'll be working on my new book, Barney. The working title is *The Fall of the House of Potter*. And believe me, it'll be a *bestseller!*"

## Chapter End Notes

Next: Public humiliation and financial ruin.

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man

would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P\*\*\*\*\*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2 (What the Sinister Man is reading): A Simple Act of Vengeance by Frickles.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors: BlueWater5, Bob, Darkarus, dragonsandotters, Fionan, Flareix\_ [Prince Flare], Jennifer Weasley, lazinessIsTheMotherOfProgress. Magica, Mr Yarrow Dread Ellen Ink, Marq, nik, Pivosh(Knight of Ron aka Reg), PrettyPinkCupcake, Reverse Card, scallionpancake, TNT, and ZombeyUnicorn. Thanks, guys!

AN4: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 14,402. Followers: 15,122. Favorites: 13,281. Communities: 220. Discord followers: Over 3000! Go Team POS!

AN5: "A plan is just a list of things that don't happen" is a line from a 2000 Ryan Phillippe film called The Way of the Gun. As I recall, it was the only clever line in an otherwise mediocre movie.

# **The Fall of the House of Potter (pt 2)**

## Chapter Notes

### SHAMELESS PLUG!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything. We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### ***Harry Potter and the Death Eater Menace***

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## ***Chapter 52: The Fall of the House of Potter (Part 2)***

### ***Hogwarts 30 March 1994***

The *Sunday Prophet*, incendiary headline and all, hit Hogwarts via owl delivery at eight o'clock. The resulting pandemonium would have thrilled Rita Skeeter had she been there to see it. All the students present were deeply

upset over the death of Rufus Scrimgeour, who'd been one of the more popular and competent DADA Professors in recent years. But the Gryffindors were further shocked to learn of the death of Auror trainee Tristan Brown, Lavender Brown's older brother who had been a Gryffindor prefect a few years before. The Ravenclaws were more solemn, and their Second Year housemate Marietta Edgecombe wasn't at breakfast. She'd already been taken to the Hospital Wing the night before and given powerful sedatives after she went into hysterics upon learning of her parents' brutal murder.

The Boy-Who-Lived was not at breakfast, which some of his in-house detractors attributed to his connection to Peter Pettigrew, or "The King of Rats," as the *Prophet* had christened him. In fact, Jim Potter had different reasons for skipping breakfast. Earlier that morning, Jim Potter had been summoned to his mother's quarters. James was still there, and over a breakfast delivered by house elves, the boy's parents told him *everything*.

First, they swore him to the family oath. Then, they told him about the Potter Prophecy and Harry's possible role as the Last Potter and the Prince of Slytherin. They told him about everything that had happened the previous night at the Ministry. They told him that Harry was affected by the Oath of Enmity, which was why he had reacted with such hostility to Jim the previous day. They told him that Peter had essentially bankrupted the family. They told him that James was now unemployed and effectively flat-broke. They told him that James was also at serious risk of losing his magic. Or of being sent to Azkaban. Or of losing his magic *and* being sent to Azkaban. And the only hope of averting those terrible options was if Harry Black showed him mercy despite the Oath of Enmity.

By the end of breakfast, Jim couldn't even look at his parents. He felt numb.

"What ... what do you need me to do?" the boy asked bleakly. Lily and James looked at one another in confusion.

"Nothing, son," James answered. "Your mother and I will handle everything. We just realized it was time to stop hiding things from you. There will be a lot of difficult days ahead, and it's only right that you know everything now. But we want you to know how much we both love you and that we're going to get through this somehow. As a *family*."

Jim nodded as he absorbed that.

"I have a couple of questions," he said after a long pause.

"Of course," Lily said expectantly. Jim looked up and gazed deeply into her eyes.

"First question: Who were you going to choose? Back in the Shrieking Shack, when Uncle ... when Wormtail told you to choose which of us was going to get bitten by Remus. Who would you have chosen?"

Instantly, Lily's face was stricken with shame, even as James looked at her in surprise and then shock. Jim just nodded.

"Okay, there's your answer, I reckon."

"Jim," Lily spoke up hesitantly. "It wasn't like that."

And then she explained everything that had raced through her mind in the few seconds she'd had to consider Pettigrew's diabolical choice. That she didn't really think Peter would let Jim be hurt, and so choosing him to be bitten might have given her an opening to do something.

That Jim's hidden power might well protect him from a werewolf just as it did from You-Know-Who. Or at the very least, it might protect him from contracting lycanthropy.

Despite himself, James couldn't help but look at Lily with reproach. But then, Jim turned to his father.

"Second Question: Who used the Imperius Curse on me?"

James's head snapped around at his son's question ... and the implied accusation that his expression now held. His mouth worked silently for several seconds.

"Seriously?" Jim asked incredulously. "You were willing to use an Unforgiveable on me to force me and Harry apart?"

"No, Jim!" James exclaimed. "It ... it wasn't like that."

"I'm hearing that a lot today," Jim said bitingly. "So ... what was it like, then?"

And just as haltingly as Lily had spoken, James explained what had happened back at Potter Manor over Christmas. How Jim had mentioned the Prince of Slytherin in passing and triggered a panic attack in James, resulting in him unleashing the Unforgiveable to force Jim to reveal what he knew. How it had been a fit of pure unbridled emotion on the part of James, who had never used the Curse before in his entire life, not even when it was legal for Aurors to do so. How the depth of distrust and suspicion Jim now felt for his twin was an unintended side effect.

Jim turned back towards Lily.

"And you knew?"

Lily swallowed. "Not at first. I figured it out ... well, the same day you learned you'd been cursed. I knew that James was the only one who could have done it but ..."

She trailed off guiltily.

Jim looked back and forth between his two parents, both of whom sat silent and abashed.

"May I be excused? I don't have any other questions right now, and I'd like to go flying for a bit and try to clear my head."

James nodded. "Of course, son."

Jim flinched slightly at the word "*son*" and then rose from his chair.

"Jim," Lily said, "you know you can't ..."

"I know," the boy interrupted quickly. "I won't tell anyone anything. Certainly not about the Imperius. The stuff that I'll have to deal with, I'll deal with. The stuff that's ... not important now, I'll just try not to think about."

Jim left the table and headed for the door, but at the threshold, he stopped and turned back to face James and Lily.

"You two," he said suddenly, "are *horrible* parents. But you're all I have."

And with that, he departed, leaving his mother and father speechless in their shame.

In light of the issues raised by the Oath of Enmity, the Potters decided that neither of them could meet with Harry face to face and have any hope of persuading him to help save James from the effects of his Unbreakable Vow. And so, they asked Dumbledore to act as an intermediary. He was one of the few people who knew the Potter Prophecy, after all. Plus, the Headmaster was someone Harry greatly admired. But most important of all, he was someone knowledgeable enough about mind-altering magic to perhaps be able to talk to Harry about the Potters without inflaming his oath-driven anger against them.

Of course, that plan required James to explain to his former Headmaster everything about his current financial and legal woes. The look of disappointment Albus gave James was withering, but he agreed to negotiate on the family's behalf. Luckily, the older wizard happened to have a ready-made excuse for visiting Potter's ex-son.

And so, around ten o'clock, Albus Dumbledore stepped through the Floo into the Longbottom parlor along with another visitor: Amy Wilkes. She was carrying a small suitcase, and after giving a respectful curtsy to Augusta and Neville, she rushed forward to give Harry a hug. To Neville's surprise, the other boy didn't flinch as much as he normally did in response to hugs.

"Hello, cousin!" she said with a grin that reflected her relief that the specter of Tiberius Nott had been dealt with. "By the way, Greg still wants to punch you."

"Why?" Harry asked in surprise. "Everything went perfectly!"

"Too perfectly. He's angry that you let him worry all this time when a five-minute speech to the Wizengamot was all



it took."

"Pfft! That wasn't *quite* all it took. And anyway, I told him before that when I solved the problem, he'd be amazed at how easy I made it seem."

The girl laughed, and everyone relocated to the solarium for a delicious brunch while they discussed the news of the previous day's events. Harry Occluded heavily and maintained a stoic expression. He was angry about Pettigrew's escape after all the work Harry had put into the traitor's capture. But more than that, the boy was quite upset about the death toll. He was especially dismayed by the death of Rufus Scrimgeour, but he was also horrified by just how many other people had died. Horrified and also guilt-stricken, as those deaths may well have only happened because of the new timeline he'd created when he used the Time-Turner to save Marcus, Remus, and Regulus.

Nor was Scrimgeour the only one he knew who died in the disaster, as Dumbledore soon explained.

"By the way, Harry, I do not wish to add to your distress over the events of last night, but you may have read that one of the first victims was Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt."

"I saw that," the boy replied. "I didn't know him very well, but from the few times we did meet, I rather liked him."

"You may have known him better than you think, Harry. Professor Snape thought that you would want to know that Kingsley Shacklebolt was the person previously known to you as *Mr. Y*."

Harry's eyes widened in shock as Dumbledore continued.

"Among Kingsley's duties as Auror was handling the Obliviation of Muggles who became involved in Auror investigations, but he was also licensed and bonded to perform freelance consensual Obliviations. Apparently, he often worked with Severus when the latter was providing Occlumency training. Despite their divergent backgrounds, the two developed a close professional relationship if not an actual friendship."

"Thank you for letting me know, sir," Harry said quietly, even as he added another familiar name to the list of people he would feel guilty over.

The conversation continued with some discussion of where Pettigrew and Rookwood might have gone or what they might be planning. Suddenly, an unpleasant idea popped into Harry's head.

"Headmaster!" he said suddenly. "What about ... *that formula* that Pettigrew tried to steal? I got it back from him, but he probably looked the formula over at least once. Could a master Legilimens like Rookwood recover his memory of seeing it and maybe reconstruct it?"

"What formula?" Neville asked.

"A very secret formula, Mr. Longbottom," Dumbledore said gravely. "More than that, I cannot reveal. But let me reassure you, Harry, that Severus and I both had the same thought. After some discussion, we hit upon a solution. There are three rare ingredients which must be added to the Belby formula in precise amounts for it to work. I have begun the process of preparing a Fidelius Charm so that those ingredients and their proportions will become a Secret. Remus Lupin has gladly volunteered to be the Secret Keeper. It will take a week to set up the spell, but

after that, any memories Pettigrew may have of the formula will be useless."

Harry nodded in relief, although something about Dumbledore's explanation troubled him. But before he could think too much about it, the Headmaster moved on to his final business at Longbottom Manor, as he delivered the news of the Potter family's further disgrace and ruination ... and the effects that the Unbreakable Vow sworn two days earlier would now have on James. Harry was not amused.

"Let me see if I fully understand the situation, Headmaster," the boy said while holding his fingers tightly laced together as he struggled to Occlude against the Oath of Enmity.

"James Potter owes me eleven million galleons and is *magically obligated* to pay me eleven million galleons due to the Unbreakable Vow that *he insisted* we both make because he couldn't trust me to go two days without backing out on my promise to leave the family. And then it turns out that he *doesn't have* eleven million galleons at all because he let a *Death Eater* swindle him out of it all. Does that cover all the important facts, sir?"

"Harry ..."

"Black," Harry snapped.

"... I beg your pardon?" Albus asked mildly.

Harry closed his eyes and focused harder on blocking the sense of extreme irritation that was being forced upon him like nettles under his skin.

"I apologize for interrupting, Headmaster," he said sincerely. "That was rude of me. *However*, you told me once that you refer to Jim and me by our first names because it

was otherwise confusing having identical Potter twins at Hogwarts together. But my name is Harry Black now, unless I decide to change it to Harry Wilkes, which is still a possibility. So, if you would normally decline to be overly familiar with a student, as you just were with *Mr. Longbottom* here, you should perhaps refer to me as Mr. Black and Jim as Mr. Potter in the future."

Dumbledore sighed. "Very well ... Mr. Black. But whatever surname you bear, there are still ties that bind you to James and Lily and Jim that no name-change can sever. Nor any oath or renunciation. Your birth parents have wronged you terribly. But I am not here on their behalf so much as your own. Circumstances have presented you with an opportunity to take revenge on the Potters or to show mercy, and whichever path you take will affect your very soul. I encourage you to do what you can to save your father from the effect of the Unbreakable Vow, not for his sake, but for yours."

Harry's expression was highly dubious, and Dumbledore suddenly recalled a conversation he'd had with the boy about how his advice to "do what is right rather than what is easy" rarely seemed helpful to Slytherins. So, he tried a different approach.

"*Alternatively*, if you require a less sentimental reason for sparing James, consider this: You and I both know that Voldemort is growing stronger and that at some point, probably soon, he will return for a final confrontation with Jim. Your actions in recent years and especially in recent days have placed you rather firmly in opposition to Voldemort and his forces, and your elevation to the Wilkes Lordship will almost certainly attract Voldemort's extreme hostility upon his return. For all James Potter's ... *shortcomings*, House Potter's destruction will only

deprive us all of a staunch ally in any future conflict with the Death Eaters."

Harry chuckled. "I appreciate you giving me a more ... *pragmatic* reason for sparing James. I will ... consider it. Although, even if I agreed to help the Potters out, how would I even do it? Is it even possible to cancel or modify an Unbreakable Vow after one party has completed their part?"

Dumbledore frowned. "I must confess that I don't know of a way off the top of my head, but magical oaths are not my forte. However, I know you have very gifted solicitors working on your behalf. If you direct them to search for a solution to James's dilemma, I am hopeful that they can find one."

Harry nodded but remained noncommittal. Soon after, Dumbledore departed by Floo, and Augusta offered to show Amy around the Manor, leaving Harry and Neville alone in the parlor. Harry sat down roughly on the couch and began massaging his temples.

"Headache?" Neville asked. Harry nodded.

"Tension headache. I still get them when I Occlude for a long time."

"Uh-huh. So, what are you going to do about your father?"

"*Ex-father*," Harry snapped. "And I don't know. I don't know if there's anything I can do. I don't know if there's anything I *want* to do."

"Come on, Harry," Neville chided. "You know you're only acting this way because of the Oath of Enmity. You'd be horrified at the thought of James losing his magic and

possibly dying if you weren't under a magical compulsion to hate him."

Harry did a double take. "Seriously, Neville? You *of all people* are going to lecture me about acting hatefully towards someone else because of *magic*?"

Neville folded his arms. "I'm not talking about the Ultimate Sanction, Harry. That's different."

"Yes! It is!" Harry spat angrily as he jumped back up. "The difference is that James Potter *earned* my hatred. Mine and Sirius Black's. Whereas Theo did *nothing* to you, and yet you hate him so much you joined the Junior Death Eaters over it."

Neville's face suddenly flushed red. "That's bull ... *dookie*! And the CPS is *not* the Junior Death Eaters! That's ridiculous and offensive!"

"Your club president and his girlfriend tried to poison the last SPAM meeting!"

Neville rolled his eyes. "Please! It was a harmless prank! No one got hurt!"

Harry, who had vivid memories of spending a miserable night in the Hospital Wing during the earlier timeline due to that harmless prank, glared angrily at his friend before calling out a name: "DOBBY!"

Instantly, the house elf arrived.

"Master Harry bellowed for Dobby?" the elf said cheerfully.

"Yes. Upstairs in my room, there's a small glass cylinder hidden inside a sock in my top dresser drawer. Could you

fetch it please? Oh, and also my grey windbreaker jacket."

"What are you doing?" Neville asked as the house elf vanished.

"I'm going out. I need some air. And also perspective from someone who's not under a spell that impairs judgment."

"My judgment is *not* impaired!" Neville growled.

"What's funny is that you assume I meant you instead of myself," Harry replied blandly.

With a pop, Dobby returned with the requested items. Neville tried to calm Harry down even as the other boy pulled on the windbreaker.

"Harry, you can't just go wandering off because you're mad at the Potters! Or at me!"

"Actually, it turns out I can. I am emancipated, after all."

"Dammit, Harry! I'm sorry I mentioned the Outcast, but that's no reason ...!"

Neville faltered when Harry turned towards him with a burning intensity in his eyes.

"Now you listen to me, Neville Francisco Longbottom," he said very quietly. "Someday – hopefully soon – but someday, Theo is going to be free of the Ultimate Sanction. Which means *you* will be free of it too. And once you are, you will feel *humiliated* by how you've been treating him this whole year!"

Harry took a step forward, and Neville swallowed under the force of his gaze.

"And when that day comes, Neville?" Harry paused dramatically. And then, he broke out into a wan smile. "Theo will forgive you without a second thought. And so will I."

Then, he turned back to the fireplace and tossed in some Floo powder. "The Leaky Cauldron!"

"Harry!" Neville called out. "I ... I don't know if that's true or not, what you just said. But if it's going to happen, it had better happen in a hurry. Because in a few months, you're going to take your Oath. And then, you'll feel the same way I do."

Harry didn't respond to that. He just stepped into the fire and was gone.

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### ***The Caretaker's Office Hogwarts***

"Oh hello, Jim!" Remus Lupin said, surprised at the boy's entrance. Then, he noticed Jim's wan expression. "I noticed you weren't at lunch. What's wrong?"

Jim shrugged. "I ... had a long talk with my parents this morning. Then, I went out flying for a few hours to try and clear my head."

"Oh dear," Lupin replied sympathetically. "That bad?"

"Yeah. So bad I can't even repeat most of it. But Ron went home for the break with the rest of his family, and I don't have anyone I can talk to. So I thought I'd come see you. I thought maybe we could train or something."

"Of course," the man replied easily. "My Sunday afternoon is at your disposal." But then, Remus's face clouded.



"You had a talk with *both* parents? So your father was here this morning?"

Jim nodded. "Yes, but I think he left soon after our talk. Did ... did you want to talk with him? He knows who you are now."

Remus sighed heavily. "I've no doubt. I ... I find myself strangely ambivalent about reuniting with him though. And oddly, I feel the same way about meeting Sirius, even though I know now that he was innocent."

"Why? I'd have thought that you'd be happy to finally meet up with your old friends again. I mean, maybe not *at the same time*. I don't know if you heard, but Sirius Black swore an Oath of Enmity against my family, so I reckon it might be unpleasant if you put them in a room together."

"Yes, I suppose it might." Remus made a sour expression. "And what a typically 'Sirius Black' thing to do. Overdramatic and thoughtless. Did your father reciprocate?"

"No," Jim said without elaboration. Remus nodded slowly, suddenly aware that Jim didn't want to talk about James Potter any more than he did.

"Right, then. If the goal is to make sure you don't do anything you'll regret later in a fit of Potter pique, I guess we'll be focusing on meditation this afternoon. Meditation and perhaps a few Earth Style katas to ground you emotionally."

Suddenly, the man's face brightened. "In other news, I gather we'll be having some *inclement* weather in the next week or so. Perhaps we'll be lucky enough to get that thunderstorm we've been waiting for all these months."

Jim looked wistful. "Honestly, I'm not sure I still want to go through with it."

At that, Remus was shocked. "Not become an Animagus?! But you've worked so hard!" Then, his face softened. "Is this because you're upset with your father? And, I suppose, with Peter?"

Jim looked away before nodding. "My Animagus form is supposed to be a symbol of what I am on the inside. Right now, I *really* don't want to be a stag. And definitely not a *rat*! But I'm scared that James and Peter have had such an influence on my life that I'll just follow in their footsteps like I always have."

Then, the boy laughed mirthlessly. "That or I'll be a snake, which carries its own unhappy baggage. People will go right back to thinking I'm a future dark wizard."

"Try to think positively, Jim. You are not your father or your godfather nor even your twin. You are your own unique person, and I'm sure your Animagus form will represent that. Now, what form do you *want*? Focus on visualizing that."

Jim leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

"I want something that can fly. Sometimes, I feel I'm only really happy on a broom. I think I could be happy with any form, just so long as I can *fly*."

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### ***The Granger Residence Crawley, London***

"Hermione!" Emma Granger called from downstairs.  
"Telephone for you!"

The witch bounded down the stairs. "Who is it?"

"It's your friend from school. The rich boy in your House. Jim Potter. We went to his house for a party last New Year's."

She handed off the phone to a surprised Hermione and then left to give her some privacy.

"Hello, Jim," she asked cautiously. "What can I do for you?"

"Actually, it's me, Harry," said Harry Black. "I just thought whichever parent answered the phone might not want to let you speak with me because of Bob."

"Who's Bob?"

"The thing in my head that Luna can't see and that makes Muggles hate me. I've decided to start calling it Bob."

"I don't know what to think about that, so I'm ignoring it for now." Hermione looked around to make sure neither of her parents could hear. "Where are you anyway? Surely the Longbottoms don't have phones!"

"They don't. I'm calling from a petrol station down the street from the Leaky Cauldron. I wanted to talk to you, but I don't think our communication parchments would reach all the way to Crawley."

"I've been wanting to talk to you too, Harry! Do you know what's been going on at the Ministry? I just got my copy of the *Sunday Prophet*, and it's awful! Poor Professor Scrimgeour dead! And all those other people! And they say your father ... ex-father might be involved somehow."

"I don't know much more than what was in the paper about all that," he answered vaguely,

"I rather imagine you know more than me, *Lord Wilkes!*"

Harry laughed, but there was an edge to it that worried Hermione.

"Is ... is there a place where we can meet up later this afternoon?" he asked somewhat timidly. "Hermione ... I really need someone to talk to. There's stuff about my situation that didn't make the papers, and I have some decisions to make in a hurry. I can catch the Knight Bus and go anywhere if you'll just give me the address."

Hermione glanced over to a nearby clock on the wall. "You can come to my house. Mum and Dad are leaving in about twenty minutes for a date."

"... A date?"

"Yes. It's something their marriage counselor recommended. That they go on '*dates*' together to, I don't know, '*reignite the spark*' or whatever. It sounds like nonsense to me, but they're going to take in a matinee and then dinner, so I'll be here alone until tonight. Here's the address."

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### ***Later ...***

One harrowing coach ride later, Harry stepped off the Knight Bus and whistled at the sight of the Granger Residence. A two-story Tudor home in a posh neighborhood, it wasn't a true mansion, but it was clearly the home of a very prosperous, upper-middle class family and roughly half-again the size of 4 Privet Drive. Petunia

would have been bitter with jealousy. He made his way up the drive and rang the bell, which Hermione answered almost immediately.

"The House of Granger bids you welcome, your Lordship," she said before giving a curtsy. Harry rolled his eyes and entered. Once inside, she gave him a brief tour of the ground floor that ended in a spacious kitchen.

"Can I get you something to drink? I could brew you some tea, but otherwise, I'm afraid we only have water, 1% milk, and Diet Dr Pepper. Mum's on a low-fat diet, and Dad's morally opposed to the sugar content of ordinary fizzy drinks."

"I'm fine, thanks." Harry took a seat, but then his expression grew perplexed. So much had happened since the last time they'd spoken that he wasn't sure where to start, and he said as much.

"Okay," Hermione replied. "Why don't you start with the most important thing first and then we'll work our way down?"

Harry nodded slowly and then took a deep breath. "Friday night, I did the Something-Something."

The witch stared at him with widening eyes. "The ... Something-Something? The same Something-Something that you couldn't tell me about in the Shrieking Shack except to say it could summon into existence a Dark God who would create Hell on Earth if you did it?"

"Yeah. Sorry about that. My bad."

"*HARRY!*"

"It wasn't my fault!" he said defensively. "After you told me about Trelawney's latest prophecy, I went straightaway and did something which I felt certain would ensure that I would never ... Something-Something."

Hermione's eyes narrowed.

"Let me guess. It turns out that the very thing you did as a way of averting the Prophecy actually caused it to come to pass?"

He nodded with a sour expression. "Is that something I would have known about if I'd taken Divination?"

"More like something you'd have anticipated if you'd ever read Greek mythology and learned the story of Oedipus."

"Who?"

"Oedipus. He tried to avert a horrible prophecy but made it come true instead. He ended up accidentally killing his father, unwittingly marrying his mother, and then deliberately blinding himself out of guilt and shame when he realized what he'd done."

Harry snorted. "So *that's* how the House of Black got founded!" he joked.

"It's not funny, Harry," Hermione chided. "So, does this mean ... the end is nigh?"

"Probably," the Slytherin answered. "It's been that kind of week."

"Right, then. The world may be ending soon. So, we're breaking into Daddy's secret stash."

Harry blinked in confusion. "Secret ... stash?"

Hermione ignored him and went over to the freezer to procure a container of "Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough" ice cream carefully hidden in the very back behind an oversized package of frozen Brussel sprouts. Apparently, it was Dan Granger's secret addiction and his sole concession to sweets in his lifelong battle against tooth decay.

"Now then," Hermione said as she dug into the ice cream with a scoop, "let's go over things chronologically starting with Professor Trelawney's last Prophecy about the Prince claiming his Throne that night. You said it related to the earlier one you got from James and that hearing the latter one gave you the idea for how to avert the first. I know you're a Lord now, but are you also a Prince? Or is it related to Justin becoming the Prince Heir? Is that Wilkes Seat you claimed actually made of basalt and silver?"

"No, it's just a wooden chair. I'm pretty sure the Something Something is totally unrelated to the Wizengamot proceedings. It happened Friday night." He hesitated. "I can neither confirm nor deny that I am any kind of Prince. Likewise about whether there's a literal throne I am now allowed to sit on."

"Hmph. This is why I hate talking to Slytherins. So, anyway, assuming hypothetically that you are now the Prince of Something who has claimed his Something Throne, how do the rest of the two Prophecies apply?"

Harry sat silently for a moment while he studied the bowl of ice cream his friend handed him. He'd never had Cookie Dough ice cream before. In fact, outside of three trips to Florian Fortescue's (including one with James where he

never even touched the bowl), he'd never had ice cream at all.

"The last Prophecy said that by my '*blameless choices*,' the Dark Lord's greatest servant would be free. According to the *Prophecy*, Rookwood is free because Pettigrew broke him out. And Pettigrew only had the chance to do so because I captured him and turned him over to the Aurors instead of ..."

He paused suddenly, and Hermione simply watched him expectantly.

"... Instead of killing him," Harry finally admitted. "Which I nearly did and easily could have. No one would have blamed me. And no one at the Ministry would have died today if I had! *Betrayal. Blood. Terror. Destruction. Death.* All because I showed mercy to a Death Eater and a traitor!"

The witch reached over and put her hand on top of his. "Harry, you can't think that way. You're not the only person in the world with agency. Lots of people made lots of decisions that led to yesterday's tragedy, most importantly Pettigrew himself when he *chose* to murder people!"

"Yeah, but of all those people, I'm the only one who had a warning Prophecy."

"A cryptic, useless Prophecy that could only be understood after the fact. The Prophecy described choices you made for which, according to the words of the Prophecy itself, you *shouldn't be blamed!* You can't go through life as the sort of person who kills a defeated and captured enemy just because you're afraid someone else's idiocy will let him escape to hurt others. Mercy is not a bad thing!"



She straightened up in her chair and gave him a stern, McGonagall-esque look. "And I shall be very cross with you, Mr. Black, if you become that sort of person out of misplaced guilt over doing the *right thing* and having it go wrong for reasons beyond your control."

Harry chuckled, despite himself.

"Besides," she continued. "Friday's Prophecy said '*choices*,' as in plural. So other than not simply executing Pettigrew when you had the chance, what other choices did you make that you think led to this outcome?"

The boy shrugged. "I took pity on James Potter. Instead of destroying him completely, I let him off in exchange for emancipation and 11 million galleons, and then he went back to the Ministry as Chief Auror where, according to the *Prophet*, he cocked things up royally. Pettigrew might not have escaped or at least killed fewer people if I'd just sent James to Azkaban when I had the chance."

Hermione's brow furrowed. "Okay, I missed this part. How were you going to send James Potter to Azkaban?"

He hesitated for quite a while before reaching into his pocket to retrieve a small glass cylinder that he passed over to the girl. She picked it up to examine it.

"This looks like the recording crystal from the Eye-Spy we found."

"Anthony made a blank one for me when he returned the damaged Eye-Spy." He took a deep breath. "On it is a confession from James Potter that *he* was the one who used the Imperius Curse on Jim."

Hermione gasped. "Harry! Why haven't you turned this over to the authorities?"

"Maybe because despite everything, until yesterday morning, he was still my father? Anyway, James said it was accidental. That Jim said something he shouldn't have about the *Prince of Something* in James's presence. James had a panic attack and Imperiused Jim to tell him everything about it and then forget about it. The irrational urge to distrust me was unintentional, the result of James not knowing how to cast an Imperius properly, I guess."

"But still! Using an Unforgiveable? And on his own son?!"

"I know, I know. I'd already figured it out and confronted him about it in the old timeline, and he admitted it then. In this timeline, I confronted him again, and he just broke down and confessed everything."

"And begged for mercy, I suppose?" she asked.

"No, he didn't, to my surprise. I think if he had, if he'd been craven about it, I might have gone ahead and exposed him. But when he confessed, he *told me* to send him to Azkaban because he felt he deserved it. He was so wrecked that ... that I realized ruining him completely wouldn't give me any satisfaction. It would just leave me more bitter towards him. So I offered a deal. Emancipation and a big pile of money in exchange for me leaving House Potter."

"And also keeping the Imperius Curse a secret?" Hermione asked.

Harry chuckled. "No, actually. He didn't even think to ask about it, and I didn't bother to remind him ... or to let him know I'd recorded the conversation. That's why I'm giving it to you."

"Me?!"

He nodded. "You're intelligent, practical, and have strong morals. You're also not bothered by either a magical compulsion of any kind to hate James, nor do you have any personal animosity towards him."

"I don't know about that," she replied archly. "I certainly don't like him very much. '*Vile fiend*' was what you said I called him in the prior timeline."

"True, but you just don't like him for what he did to me. And I suppose to Jim. But you won't let your emotions towards him influence your judgment."

"And what judgment do you want me to make?" she asked as she held the recording crystal up to the light.

"I want you to hold that for me. Keep it in a safe place. And if I ever come to you and ask for it back, you are to *grill me* and find out why I've decided to send James away to prison forever. And unless I persuade you that it's the right thing to do, *don't give it to me*. Thanks to Sirius Black, I am now under the effects of an Oath of Enmity towards House Potter. Apparently, he and James met unexpectedly right after the Wizengamot, and Sirius had a freak-out over it. It seems he misunderstood and thought James was the one pushing for me to leave House Potter and only agreed to testify for Sirius if I did. As I am now magically a true member of House Black and also Lord Black's godson, I'm affected by the Enmity. If I keep that crystal, eventually, I'll have a moment of weakness and use it against James. And life in Azkaban is too harsh a penalty to impose on someone just out of *spite*. And certainly not artificial, magically-compelled spite."

"I don't know. You seem to be handling it pretty well right now."

"Hermione," he said in a deadpan voice. "You would not believe how hard I have been Occluding since we started talking about James Potter. It's the only reason I can talk about him at all without lapsing into an angry rant."

She shuddered at the thought of using Occlumency nonstop to block out an emotional compulsion of that nature. Then, she took the recording crystal and slipped it into her pocket.

"So, do you really think that because you showed mercy to James, it somehow facilitated Pettigrew's escape?" she asked.

"Possibly. In any case, my mercy didn't do James any good. He stupidly insisted that our agreement be enforced by an Unbreakable Vow. But now, it turns out that he doesn't have the money to pay me because the idiot let Pettigrew rob him blind. So instead of going to Azkaban, he's going to lose his magic and probably die by the end of the week instead. Well, unless my solicitors figure out a loophole."

He coughed in some embarrassment. "Which I also haven't even asked them to do yet because I'm under the Oath of Enmity, and it *really* wants me to just let him die, I think."

Hermione nodded slowly. "Is that why you came here, Harry? You want me to provide a reason to save James Potter? Or failing that, absolution for letting him die?"

Harry grimaced. "I suppose ... that I would like to hear a reason for sparing him ... that a *Slytherin* would respect enough to accept."

"Hmm. I'm not sure if I have it in me to think that much like a Slytherin," she said.

"Please! After everything you did in the past year? You would have made an excellent Slytherin!"

"Thanks ... I think." She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. Harry resumed eating his ice cream while she thought about the matter.

"Okay," she finally said after nearly a minute of contemplation. "What if it's not his fault?"

Harry crooked an eyebrow. "I think you'll have to do better than that. What if *what's* not his fault?"

"Everything that he's done to you, as well as the Imperius on Jim. The last line of the Potter Prophecy says the Last Potter will, as you put it so, do *Something Something*. But the *next to last line* talks about the two who should be as one set against each other in reckless hate."

"I know all that. And by cursing Jim to distrust me, he set that in motion."

"Yes, just as Sirius Black *kept* it in motion and accelerated it by invoking a family-wide oath that affects you. Both of '*the two who should be as one*' have to be set against each other. So that line of the Prophecy wasn't fulfilled until Black caused you to feel hostility towards Jim to match the hostility he feels towards you."

"Wait a minute! Are you suggesting that James and Sirius were, what, mind-controlled by the Prophecy?"

"Not as such. After we talked about the last Prophecy that Professor Trelawney made which I witnessed, I spent a few

hours reading what the upper-year Divination textbooks say about True Prophecies. There's not a lot of reliable information, but from what I picked up, they don't have the power to force people to act in a way to bring them about. But they *can interfere* with free will to cause those involved in the Prophecy to make decisions that help bring it to fruition by making sure they're presented with bad or incomplete information beforehand."

Harry shook his head in confusion. "You've lost me. Do we have free will or not?"

"According to the books, we have free will, but we're not all-knowing. Each of us is limited by what we actually know or can guess when we make decisions. And worse, those decisions often don't even seem important at the time, and so we might make them based on seemingly random reasons. Perhaps even just a coin toss. But regardless, they can create ripple effects that can fulfill prophecy conditions later."

Harry still looked perplexed. "Sorry, I'm still not sure I'm following you."

The girl glanced down at his bowl. "Would you like some more ice cream?" she asked suddenly.

"I'm still working on this one. But thanks."

"Okay, but after you finish that one, would you like another bowl?"

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Maybe. Why do you ask?" he said cautiously.

"What if I told you of a prophecy I'd overheard that said something like '*When the Lord of House Wilkes eats a*

*second bowl of ice cream, his doom shall come before the next dawn.'* Would that make you more or less likely to ask for another bowl of ice cream?"

He stared at the girl and then slowly pushed the bowl away. "I expect not in that case. Is there *another* prophecy to worry about now?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, I'm just trying to prove a point. If there *were* such a prophecy *but you didn't know about it*, you would decide whether to have another bowl based on nothing but arbitrary personal preference and how hungry you happened to be. Just as my decision to offer you ice cream would have been completely arbitrary on my part if I didn't know the Ice Cream Prophecy either.

"From what you've said, your father obviously wasn't thinking about that part of the Potter Prophecy when he used the Imperius on Jim. And I assume Black didn't know anything about the Prophecy at all when he invoked the Oath of Enmity. Certainly, he didn't stop to think about how it would cause you to become hostile towards your brother. Both of them were given provocatively incomplete information and then put into situations where they were primed to become emotional and overreact. And that's how prophecy conditions get fulfilled."

Harry nodded in sudden understanding. "That's sort of how Countess Zabini described True Prophecies to me once. I asked her if free will existed in a world with True Prophecies, and she said we're free to make our own choices, but *Fate* shapes the world around us to manipulate us into making choices that move Prophecies forward."

Then, the Slytherin's eyes widened and he shot up out of his chair to start pacing the room anxiously.

"What is it?" Hermione asked in concern. He turned back to her with a shocked expression.

"I was the same way," he said faintly. "I told Sirius ahead of the Wizengamot meeting that I would be leaving House Potter to become a Black, and I reassured him that I was fine with it. But I didn't give him any details. Not about the fact that it was my idea. Or about how I was doing it in exchange for emancipation and money. And certainly not because I was trying to avert a dangerous prophecy. So he just assumed ..."

"Assumed what?"

Harry gave his friend a stricken look. "When Sirius Black wasn't much older than us, he ran away from home and became a ward of House Potter. His name never changed because his grandfather never officially disowned him, but ... he did it because his parents were violently abusive to him! So when Sirius saw how happy I was to just walk away from the Potters, he *assumed* that I was doing so to escape abusive parents. *Dammit!* If I had just *told* him...!"

He looked away in frustration. "But I didn't trust him with all the information. I thought he might interfere somehow. Mess up all my *cunning Slytherin plans!*"

Then, Harry turned back towards Hermione in frustration. "Is that really it? Is there actually some *cosmic force* that has decided for some dumb reason that my brother and I have to *hate each other* just to tick off a box on some prophecy to-do list that's been waiting for 200 years to get fulfilled?"

"Harry, calm down!" she answered. "We'll figure out how to beat this Prophecy! To beat *all* these Prophecies!"



Something in his friend's words registered in Harry's mind, and for a few seconds, he dilated to think. Then, he suddenly went very pale and sat back down.

"Oh dear," Hermione said softly, "What now?"

Harry licked his lips nervously. "Hermione, do you know why you decided to give me access to the Time-Turner? Do you know what specific thing made you do it?"

The witch looked at him strangely. "Well, no, since it was a different version of myself who no longer exists. But from what you told me, I'm pretty sure it was to avert the Werewolf Apocalypse. That's what you told the Unspeakables at least."

"There was never going to be a Werewolf Apocalypse," he said flatly. "I spoke to the Headmaster earlier today, and it was mentioned that even if Pettigrew didn't get away with the actual Wolfsbane Formula, he saw it written down, and Rookwood might have been able to recover the memory enough to duplicate it. Dumbledore said he'd already thought about that and that he was making arrangements to protect the formula with the Fidelius Charm so that it would be impossible to recreate that way."

Hermione blinked in confusion. "So after all that drama about Pettigrew's army of intelligent werewolves, it was just that easy for the Headmaster to solve the problem?"

"Super easy!" Harry snapped. "Barely an inconvenience!"

Then, it was Hermione's turn to grow pale as she began to understand. "So if you weren't meant to use the Time-Turner to prevent Pettigrew from getting the formula ..."

"I was meant to use the Time-Turner solely to *undo the Ultimate Sanction*! Remember Trelawney's latest Prophecy? '*With all obstacles removed, the Prince will claim the Throne of Basalt and Silver.*' She didn't make that Prophecy in the previous timeline because when I was put under the Sanction, it became *impossible* for me to become Prince. It was only after I went back in time and took steps to make sure James couldn't use the Sanction on me that she gave the Prophecy announcing all the obstacles were removed. And she made that Prophecy in front of you so that you would immediately share it with me, and I would respond to it by trying to remove myself from contention as Prince in a way that led to my claiming the Throne literally against my own will!"

Hermione looked at her friend in wonder. "So Fate used *me* too! That part of the Potter Prophecy about you becoming the Prince of the Something Throne came true! But *only* because Professor Trelawney's most recent Prophecy was uttered in a way that manipulated you into causing it to happen!"

Harry looked at her helplessly. "My enemy isn't James. It isn't even Voldemort. My enemy is Fate itself! How the hell am I supposed to fight against *that*?!"

Hermione considered the matter. "Well for a start," she finally said. "I think we're going to need a lot more ice cream."

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### ***Longbottom Manor*** ***6:00 p.m.***

When Harry stepped out of the Floo Network into the Longbottom's parlor, Dobby was waiting for him.

"Good evening, Master Harry. Dobby hopes your afternoon was well-spent. May Dobby take your jacket?"

"Please. And my afternoon was ... productive, I guess. But not as helpful as I'd hoped. Have I missed supper?"

"Dinner will be served at seven o'clock, Master Harry. Also, sir. Dobby has a message for Master Harry. It arrived this afternoon by owl."

The house elf reached into the inside pocket of his little jacket and produced a sealed envelope. Harry took it and immediately recognized the handwriting (which, oddly, was very similar to his own). He closed his eyes to steel himself and to clamp down on the unnatural emotions now being forced upon him. Then, he tore open the letter.

*Harry -*

*I don't know if sending you this letter will help or hurt. I know about the oath now and that you basically feel towards me like Ron and Draco felt towards one another before the Malfoy-Weasley Oath of Enmity was ended. I don't feel that way towards you. Just a stupid vague distrust that I'm struggling to ignore.*

*I also know about all the other stuff you hinted at, including that other Prophecy. I understand now why Dad acted the way he did after I told him -*

*Wow.*

*I literally can't even write down what I told him to set him off just on the off chance someone else finds this letter. Stupid oath! Well anyway, I reckon you know what I told him before I knew the Prophecy, and you know why it set him off too.*

*I don't mean that I approve of what he did or agree with it. Just as I sure don't approve of what he did to me (yeah, I know that too). Frankly, I'm furious with him. I mean, I can understand why he did the things he did. But that doesn't stop me from thinking that he handled everything in the worst way, and we're the ones who have to clean up his mess. We both have reasons to be angry with James Potter, maybe even to want him to suffer.*

*Despite all that, though, he's still my father. I know he's not yours. Not anymore, if he ever really was. And so I understand how you must feel about him and why you might even want to leave him to his fate. But I still love him even after what he did to you and to me. That's why I'm writing this letter – to ask for your mercy on his behalf, and I'm hoping that getting a letter from me while you're under the effects of an Oath of Enmity doesn't make things worse the way it probably would if I came and asked in person..*

*I used to joke that you were the "Master of Mind Magics," but now I hope it's really true. So if there's any part of you that can see past the Enmity and remember that we're still brothers, then I'm on my knees begging you.*

*Please don't kill my Dad.*

*Jim*

Harry read through the letter twice, his face impassive. He folded it back up and returned it to the envelope before addressing Dobby.

"Please give my regards to the others, Dobby. I'm afraid I'll be missing dinner as well."

Then, the Slytherin turned back to the fireplace and tossed in some Floo powder.

"Artemus Podmore Residence," he said, and the fire changed colors.

Two minutes later, Harry was at his solicitor's home.

Fifteen minutes after that, the two were shouting at each other for the first time since their association began.

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***From a memo to the Director of the Department of Mysteries***

***To: 001***

***From: 013 (Acting Director of the Mind Division)***

***Date: 02/04/1994***

***RE: The March 1994 "Rookwood Incident"***

***cc The Ethics Committee***

*Pursuant to Departmental directive issued 31/03/1994, the Division of Mind has completed its assessment of Unspeakable 009. Results are as follows:*

*Assessment of 009's mindscape:* *Our deep-scan of 009's mind finds no indication that 009 himself was compromised in any way by Rookwood's defenses. While 009 has suffered significant degradation of his psychic architecture as a result of the deep-scan itself, none of the damage predates the assessment. 009 is expected to remain in a healing coma for at least two weeks. It is too early to tell whether he can make a full recovery over time or whether he will have to be decommissioned. Regardless, it is unlikely he will be able to continue as Director of the Mind Division during his convalescence, if ever.*

*Review of 009's memories of the Rookwood scan of 29/03/1994 :* *Our initial analysis of 009's memories seemed to confirm his own earlier assessment - that Rookwood's*

*long-term Dementor exposure combined with subsequent psychological torture inflicted on him by his captors post-Azkaban had totally destroyed his psychic architecture to the point that he was essentially mindless. Obviously, this assessment was incorrect, but the truth was only revealed via a deep-scan of 009's memories. In 009's defense, we believe that this truth was not one he could possibly have discerned on his own, as penetrating Rookwood's defenses, even in memory form, required a Stage 4 mind-link which was not standard protocol. Recommendations for modifying future interrogation protocols are forthcoming.*

*What the Stage 4 revealed is something extraordinary and unprecedented. It appears that Augustus Rookwood found the means to greatly exceed the number of parallel mind-streams that can be maintained simultaneously via Occlumency. While a seven-stream array is, of course, common among DOM-trained Occlumens, several centuries worth of Arithmantic research had left us with the firm conviction that it was a hard limit. And yet, Rookwood plainly has exceeded it, likely by a substantial degree.*

*Exactly how many separate minds he possesses cannot be determined from the information we have. However, based on Rookwood's own notes recovered after his arrest, he hypothesized that 49 separate minds would be not only feasible but stable. While that sounds astounding at first blush, it makes sense. Seven times seven is indeed a symbolically strong number. The trick, of course, lies in constructing that 49-stream array without destroying one's mind at some point between the 7th mind and the 49th. How he achieved it at all, let alone while being an Azkaban inmate, is a mystery, though we have several theories under discussion. Indeed, now that we know it is possible, research into this area has been upgraded to the highest*

*priority, and replicating Rookwood's feat may prove easier than one might think.*

*Of course, more important than "how did Rookwood achieve it?" is the question "what can he do with it?" As with the "how," research into possible applications is ongoing. At a minimum, we should assume that Rookwood is effectively immune to outside Legilimency, though his possible vulnerability to Occlumency traps remains unclear. I refer you to yesterday's report by the Subcommittee on Unorthodox Intelligence suggesting that, despite his mental puissance, Rookwood was very nearly defeated by Rufus Scrimgeour with an exceptionally powerful Occlumency trap.*

*Regardless, we should assume that Rookwood is effectively immune to mind-alteration, emotion-manipulation, and memory-altering Charms and Potions of every kind. If nothing else, he is clearly immune to the Tabula Rasa, and that is the most powerful memory-erasing curse known to us. Rookwood was known to be obsessed with protecting himself from mental alteration after his 1976 censure over the "Severus Snape Affair." It is possible that the practical Occlumency benefits of 49 thought-streams are largely redundant. Having built a fifty-foot psychic moat around his mind that we cannot cross, he has taken the trouble to build a fifty-foot wall as well, which may be more a sign of his pathology than anything else.*

*Of course, his psychic network may well have tactical applications unknown to us, for we are limited to conjecture. We are certain that he can still only cast one spell at a time no matter how many minds he has active simultaneously. That is a fundamental limitation of the Merlinian system which is completely unaffected by the wizard's capacity for parallel thought. While he will likely*

*be able to cast more spells in quicker succession, dueling was never his specialty, so it is unknown whether this will result in an actual increase in combat proficiency.*

*But more importantly, his heightened capacity for memory and pattern recognition will likely allow him to cast some spells thought too difficult for a normal witch or wizard to conceptualize. For example, during his escape, he apparently used the "Imperius Horribilis." Until yesterday, the only wizards definitively known to have successfully cast the Mass Imperius have been Herpo the Foul, the Nameless Witch of Calais, Ekridis, Selene of Byzantium, Koschek the Mad, Gellert Grindelwald, and You-Know-Who. As a precautionary measure. I have directed a review of the historical literature for a list of other "impossible" spells that might now be in Rookwood's repertoire.*

*It is also likely that his 49-stream matrix will improve his facility with the implantation of false personalities in unwitting subjects, his most fearsome tactic during the Death Eater Insurrection. We don't think he will be able to do so with casual ease, though his limitations are, again, conjecture. But he will almost certainly be able to generate and implant such a false personality directly through some combination of wanded magic and Legilimency instead of his former tactic of implanting them slowly over the course of months through the means of cursed books that must be read in their entirety. Thus, as long as Rookwood is free, the proliferation of sleeper-agents secretly loyal to You-Know-Who is a concern.*

*A copy of this report has been forwarded to the Ethics Committee with a recommendation that Rookwood's termination by any means necessary be made a top priority. To that end, I am also formally requesting that the Ethics Committee temporarily rescind the ban on research into*



*cognitohazards and semiotic kill-agents and authorize the use of same against Rookwood and any other individuals suspected of following in his footsteps. The Mind Division understands the risks of such research but unanimously agrees that they are outweighed by the existential threat posed by Rookwood to the Department and its mission, especially if he rejoins a resurgent You-Know-Who.*

*Report ends.*

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***Gringotts Bank***  
**The Account Settlement Room**  
**4 April 1994**  
**10:00 a.m.**

The Gringotts "Account Settlement Room" was a small and austere 20x20 chamber that had been set aside since time immemorial for negotiations between angry creditors and their debtors who had come to plead for forbearance. To drive home the essential power disparity in such a debtor-creditor relationship, the room contained only three items of furniture: a large mahogany table, with an over-stuffed and very comfortable leather chair on one side and a hard wooden stool on the other. While not its official name, wizards aware of the stool and its significance often referred to it as "the Debtor's Perch."

When James Potter had been a boy, his father had once mentioned visiting this room to meet with wizards who owed the family money, and he'd talked about the Debtor's Perch. James never once imagined that he'd one day find out just how uncomfortable a seat it was.

Across the table sat Artemus Podmore, Harry's solicitor. Despite their antagonistic legal history, James had always

thought he and Podmore had an amicable or at least professional relationship. And so, he figured it was a testament to how badly he'd screwed everything up that the other man was now glaring at him as if fighting down the urge to cast the Killing Curse.

"Before we begin," Podmore said coldly. "There is something I wish to clarify for the record. While I am Lord Wilkes's solicitor, and while my firm represents Lord Black, I am *not* under the effects of the Oath of Enmity. The oaths of professionalism that I took upon completing my Law Mastery protect me from such mind-altering magics."

He paused and made a face. "That begs the question, of course, as to how *your* former solicitor, Peter Pettigrew, who I'm sure took the same oaths, betrayed literally everyone he'd ever worked for so completely. Rest assured I will be bringing that question up to my fellow members of the Wizarding Bar at our next official meeting. But I digress."

Podmore paused as if collecting himself. "I want you to know that I am not under the effects of the Oath of Enmity because it is important for me that you understand something: *the intense and deeply personal disdain I feel for you is not magically induced but rather 100% natural and 100% the result of your own egregious conduct!*"

James winced but said nothing. It wasn't as though he had any sort of defense, after all.

"In my opinion, your conduct has been despicable to some degree ever since I first undertook representation of Lord Wilkes, or Harry Potter as he was known back then. You abandoned him for ten years. You drunkenly threatened in front of his entire school to *snap his wand* and send him

back to a household you *knew* to be abusive. You consistently favored your younger son over Harry, except for that time after Jim Potter was revealed as a Parselmouth, when you proved your capacity to be a poor father to *both* your sons. You *squandered* Harry's birthright to the point that House Potter, a leading voice in the Wizengamot for centuries, is bankrupt and may no longer be able to afford its seat!"

Podmore's eyes blazed. "But all of that pales compared to your worst sin against your former son: you induced him to swear an Unbreakable Vow with conditions you yourself cannot complete! Which means that, aside from *defrauding him* by having him swear on his life and magic in exchange for obligations you cannot fulfill, you have put him in the position of either being indirectly responsible for your death ... or risking his own life to save yours!"

James's eyes widened. "What do you mean?" he asked in confusion.

Podmore sneered at the man. "How unsurprising that you would invoke the power of the Unbreakable Vow without fully understanding how it works! The Vow, once sworn, cannot be unilaterally voided by any means, not even with the consent of all parties. It continues to bind everyone who swears the Vow to their individual terms until completion or until the death of any and all oathbreakers. And if one party, even one who has fulfilled his own requirements, attempts to simply *release* the other from any obligations, the Oath treats them *both* as oathbreakers."

Potter's face went ashen. "I ... I didn't know that," he said weakly.

"Obviously not. And so, here we are. Despite both the justifiable hatred Lord Wilkes has for you and the supernaturally-imposed hatred engendered by the Oath of Enmity, Harry Black is a person of such will and integrity that he does not wish for you to die even as a result of your own foolishness.

"He first asked me whether he could simply release you from any financial obligations to him that you cannot meet. I explained why that would likely have fatal results for you both. He next proposed that, as Lord Wilkes, he would loan you enough money so that you could then pay him what you owe under the Vow, with the new debt to be either repaid or simply forgiven later. I explained to Lord Wilkes that there was a good chance the Vow would consider that an attempt to cheat the terms, again with fatal results, though admittedly I was unsure because the issue is both legally and magically murky. He then expressed a desire to take the risk anyway if it would save your life."

Podmore's eyes glinted with contempt. "At that point, I explained to Lord Wilkes that if he even considered undertaking such a risk, I would immediately withdraw as his counsel and file for an emergency injunction with the Wizengamot to bar him from transferring any funds to you on the grounds that you were exercising undue influence on him."

James shook his head. "I'm not trying to influence him at all!"

"Oh, I don't care!" the solicitor snapped. "Even if it turned out to be a frivolous motion, it would work long enough to stop Harry from giving you any funds until after the Debts Committee of the Wizengamot had met to consider the motion. And their next scheduled meeting won't be until the

end of June, by which time the problem of your Unbreakable Vow would have resolved itself ... *permanently*."

James swallowed.

"So let me make myself utterly clear, Lord Potter," Artemus Podmore said in a voice like a knife. "I will see you dead and buried before you do anything else to harm that boy. Do you understand?"

"Y-yes," James stammered.

Podmore stared balefully at him for a moment.

"Good. Now, with those disclaimers out of the way, let us turn to the matter at hand. While I have taken steps to ensure that Lord Wilkes cannot simply release you from the Vow to his own possible detriment, he remains desirous that you somehow be rescued from this disaster of your own making. Aside from his ethical concerns over being in some way responsible for your death, he does not wish to see his mother widowed, nor his brother half-orphaned. Likewise, he does not wish to see an Ancient and Noble House cast down into ignominious ruin. And so, he has directed me to find a solution for your financial woes. After spending several days consulting with Mr. Rib-Cracker, we believe we may have found a solution."

For the first time since entering the room, James felt a spark of hope. "You have?"

"Don't get too excited, Potter. I doubt you're going to like it."

Then, he opened a file on the table in front of him and began flipping through it.

"The proposal I have prepared to resolve House Potter's financial crisis is as follows:

"First, you will make a '*donation*' of five million galleons to the Ministry to repair the damages inflicted by Peter Pettigrew during his escape. I have met with Minister Fudge, and he is amenable to that figure in a lump sum payment since Lord Wilkes has agreed to cover any costs in excess of that. Your own donation will be deemed *anonymous*, with Lord Wilkes officially recognized by the Ministry as the responsible party. You will, I expect, be pleased to know that any of your improprieties which might otherwise give rise to a criminal investigation will be swept under the rug by the Minister as part of this deal.

"Second, all outstanding debts owed by your House to parties other than Lord Wilkes will be paid in full, with any collateral assets liquidated and applied to the principal balance owed.

"Third, all non-entailed physical assets of James Potter will be auctioned off with the proceeds added to your family's cash assets. Gringotts will handle the auction itself, and since time is of the essence, the bank will advance cash equal to the appraised value of the items to be auctioned. Then, all of House Potter's cash assets will be conveyed to House Wilkes to pay towards the debt you owe it. The Goblin accountants anticipate that the Wilkes debt will still suffer an estimated shortfall of 3.7 million galleons.

"Fourth, House of Potter will enter into a five-year fealty agreement with the House of Wilkes whereby Lord Wilkes will assume responsibility for paying your Wizengamot dues during that time in exchange for control over nine of your ten house votes and all three of the Order of Merlin votes held by you, your wife, and your remaining son. Although

this will actually *cost* Lord Wilkes the sum of 500,000 galleons over five years, the Goblin appraisers have certified that the effective present-day cash value of controlling those twelve votes for the maximum length of time allowed under the law is equal to 1.8 million galleons, leaving a net value of 1.3 million. This will be applied to the Wilkes debt shortfall, reducing it to a deficiency of 2.4 million galleons.

"Fifth, while not specifically germane to the issue of your debt to Lord Wilkes, my client has grave concerns over the disposition of the Jim Potter Charitable Trust. While it suffered grievous mismanagement under your former Seneschal, Lord Wilkes believes that it performs a valuable social function, and he desires that it be maintained ... *but not* under the exclusive control of the Potter Family. As a condition of this agreement, Lord Wilkes requires you to permit the Trust to be reorganized and placed under the control of an independent board of directors and subject to annual audits. Neither you nor your wife will sit on that board during its first five years of operation."

The solicitor paused and studied James, who felt as though he'd just gone ten rounds with a hippogriff. "Do you have any questions, so far?"

James closed his eyes and swallowed. He would be penniless and probably lucky if he was allowed to leave the room with the clothes on his back. And House Potter would be *a vassal*?! And he still wasn't out of the woods yet!

"I ... I believe you said there's still a shortfall of two million galleons?"

"Two-point-*four* to be exact. Which is a problem, because under the agreement as outlined so far, you have nothing

left to your name except for two entailed assets – Potter Manor and a certain Cloak of Invisibility – that cannot be sold and must always pass to the Heir so long as such an Heir can be found."

James noticed an odd gleam in the other man's eyes, one that spoke of an almost cruel satisfaction.

"*But* while an entailed asset may not permanently devolve to anyone outside the Heirs of the Household, I have ascertained, and the Goblins have confirmed, that such assets can be *leased*."

Potter suddenly felt like throwing up. They would take his *home* now. His home and the Cloak that he'd entrusted to Jim back during his First Year. He had officially cost his family everything.

"Leased ... for how long?" he croaked out.

Podmore shrugged. "To an extent, that is up to you, as we have some flexibility. To my own great surprise, the Goblins have certified that the material value of possessing the Potter Cloak is *greater* than that of possessing a manor house that's almost as old as Hogwarts. They were not willing to explain how they came to that conclusion, but it's certified and that's what matters under the Vow. Anyway, by their estimation, you can satisfy your outstanding debt to Lord Wilkes by leasing Potter Manor to him rent-free for a period of no less than thirty years. Alternatively, you can lease him the Cloak for ten years. Or you can lease both items and we can work out the duration on a sliding scale."

"Jim still has to be protected," James blustered. "He's the Boy-Who-Lived, and ..."



"And you don't want your family to be homeless?" Podmore snapped. "Personally, I don't see how that's our problem. However, you will be pleased to know that Lord Wilkes is aware of the importance of the Boy-Who-Lived to our society, as well as the danger posed to him by unsavory elements. Consequently, in the event that you elect to surrender the manor house, he has asked me to take steps to ensure your son's safety during the summer months until he comes of age. And also, I suppose, to see that you don't end up sleeping on a park bench or something."

He slid a paper across the table. "I have taken the liberty of allocating one unencumbered Potter property as a residence for your family's use. It already has an extensive and high-quality ward scheme in place that can be restored to full potency before the end of the school year, and it can easily be set up for Floo travel. But it is also in a Muggle area, and with the appropriate secrecy Charms, we can ensure that Jim Potter's summer residence will remain undisclosed to the Wizarding World. Finally, we can convey the home to House Potter without it adversely affecting your outstanding debt through the legal fiction that it is actually your wife's long overdue dowry as a daughter of House Wilkes."

James picked up the paper and studied it, his eyes widening in shock.

"You're *joking*!" he gasped.

"No, Lord Potter," the other man said languidly. "I'm quite serious. Though that doesn't stop me from finding the situation to be *ironically amusing*!"

He nodded towards the door to indicate the meeting was over. "You have our proposal, Lord Potter. Consult with your

family and get back to me. Quickly, though. You only have one day left, after all, if you wish to live!"

James swallowed again before rising from the Debtor's perch and heading for the door. He knew his wife and son would insist that he take the deal even if it cost them everything else. Once outside the door, he looked at the address on the scrap of paper the solicitor had given him. He found nothing amusing about the proposed housing situation, but he had to agree with the solicitor.

The Potter family moving to *4 Privet Drive, Surrey* would indeed be ironic.

## Chapter End Notes

Next: Severus Snape learns of some family secrets, and the Marauders finally reunite. Meanwhile, Harry sets other plans in motion, expands his own inner circle, and has a startling realization about You-Know-Who.

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P\*\*\*\*\*n page and supported my original fiction.

Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2 (What the Sinister Man is reading): Nothing new at the moment.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors: bearden2000/ATRDCl, Berserk homud, BlueWater, Bob, cheeky\_elf, dbc, Flareix\_ [Prince Flare], Krisni, LFGB (Head Priest of Bob), Magica, Megha Teresa,

MsBlackburn, Norégveldi, Pivosh(Knight of Ron aka Reg), rhyce, Rogue1 (Knight of FAAAAWKEEEES!), TNT, and TrendyTreky. Thanks, guys!

AN4: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 14,532. Followers: 15,225. Favorites: 13,385. Communities: 222. Discord followers: Over 3200! Go Team POS!

AN5: "Super easy! Barely an inconvenience!" is a reference to the invariably funny "Pitch Meeting" series on Screen Rant. "Stage 4 links" is lifted from a similar concept in the brilliant Erfworld webcomic (sadly now defunct, it seems).

# **The Future All Around Us, Waiting to Be Born (pt 1)**

## Chapter Notes

### SHAMELESS PLUG!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, please leave a review. Basically, it's American Harry Potter. Except there's no school, no wands, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything. We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### ***Harry Potter and the Death Eater Menace***

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***Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.***

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### ***Chapter 53: The Future All Around Us, Waiting to Be Born (pt 1)***

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***The Office of the Senior Undersecretary to the  
Minister  
4 April 1994***

"Knock, knock," said Pius Thicknesse as he rapped the frame of the open door. In response, Dolores Umbridge looked up from her desk, and her face brightened.

"Pius!" she exclaimed. "Do come in. I've been meaning to pop round to the Auror Department to see how you were doing, but the Minister's office has been a madhouse for the last week."

"Well, I'm glad to have saved you a trip," he said genially. At that point, Dolores noted to her own surprise that he was carrying a bouquet of flowers. Pius coughed in mild embarrassment and then blushed.

"I brought you these as a get-well-soon present. I do hope I'm not being forward in doing so."

"Not at all," Dolores replied. If her voice suddenly went a bit higher in pitch than usual, Pius didn't notice it. She quickly conjured a vase for the flowers. "They're lovely, Pius. Thank you."

"My pleasure." His expression turned pensive. "How are you, Dolores? I know you had to spend a while at St. Mungo's for what those bastards did to you. And it must have been rough coming back to work where it all happened. I know you and the Edgecombe's were close."

Dolores sniffed. "We were. Violetta and I were at Hogwarts together and were always close friends despite our different houses. And Thomas was always kind to me. Of course, it's even more heartbreaking for their poor daughter, Marietta. Just 12 and an orphan! And I don't know if they had any close relatives who could take her in. I'm worried about what's to become of her."

Pius shook his head. "Oh, I know, I know. Thomas was my cousin on my mother's side, but we basically grew up as brothers. In fact, well, I'm actually her godfather. I want to do what I can for the girl, but I'm a single man *and* an Auror. I don't know if it would be proper for me to offer her a home. Aside from never having had children, I worry my job might be too dangerous for me to be the sort of father figure she needs right now."

The witch reached over and patted him on the hand. "I want you to know – if I can do anything to help, please ask."

"That's very kind of you, Dolores. Thank you."

She smiled and decided to change the subject. "So ... how's the new boss treating you."

"Chief Bones?" Pius chuckled. "She's going to be a tyrant, I think. But that's what the Corps needs right now. If you ask me, we were getting a bit *flabby* under ... well, under Potter's administration. I hate to speak ill of the man after everything that's happened to him, but James Potter had no business being Chief Auror. I'm sure that if Old Scrimgeour had been healthy and in shape, he'd have taken down those Death Eaters all by himself. Instead, he ... well..."

Pius trailed off sadly, and Dolores nodded in sympathy.

"I ... didn't see it happen. I'd been stunned by that point. I just wish I could have done more to help him." Her eyes began to water.

"Here now," Pius said firmly. "You mustn't feel any guilt! Those two were hardened killers. I'm just glad you were only stunned. If you don't mind me asking, did the Healers say what Rookwood hit you with?"

"No," she replied. "I don't clearly remember it myself. It's all just a blur. I just remember him standing over me with those cruel eyes." She shuddered. "I still have nightmares about those eyes. Anyway, next thing I knew, I was waking up in a hospital bed. The Healers think it was just an overpowered stunner. I've been fine since then. And you?"

"I was lucky. Just a concussion and a few broken bones from the explosion. I was right as rain the next day."

Then, he noticed the brooch on her jacket, a stylized white cat on a solid oval background. He smiled.

"I never got to tell you, but your Patronus is quite impressive. Half the Auror Corps can't do a corporeal one as good as that. Does it have a name?"

Pleased by the compliment, Dolores returned the smile. "His name is Wilberforce. At the home of the Muggle Prime Minister, there's a tradition of keeping a cat on the premises. The Chief Mouser of the Cabinet Office, it's called, and around the time I learned the Patronus Charm, Wilberforce held the post." She giggled softly. "I've always liked cats, and I loved the idea of a feline official who worked for the government."

Pius snorted. "Honestly, after what happened here, I'm kind of in favor of government cats for the Ministry now."

"I suppose I should suggest that to Cornelius. So what is the name of your Patronus?"

The Auror hesitated. "I call her ... Shelly," he said with some embarrassment.

Dolores blinked, "Shelly ... the turtle?"

To his own consternation, Pius blushed *again*. "When I was a little sprog, I had a turtle named Shelly. Being five years old at the time, I thought that was the height of wit. Anyway, my happy memory was one from my childhood and the original Shelly played a part in it, so that's what I named my Patronus."

"I should like to hear the story of that happy memory sometime," Dolores said indulgently. "If it's not too personal."

"Not at all," Pius said before taking a deep breath. "Perhaps, um, we could talk about it over dinner sometime?" he asked while struggling to keep his voice steady.

Now it was Dolores's turn to blush, and she fought down the urge to titter again. She'd always hated the sound of her own laugh ever since some of the other Slytherin girls had mocked her for it back in her school days.

"That would be lovely, Pius. If you're free tonight, I get off work at five, but I'll need to pop home and change."

"I'll pick you up at seven?" he asked.

"That would be wonderful."

Pius exhaled in relief. Despite his status as a Senior Auror, he had not, historically, had good luck in asking women out on dates. He pointed at the brooch.

"So is that supposed to be the real Wilberforce?" he asked mischievously.

Dolores glanced down at the somewhat gaudy piece of jewelry. "This? Oh, no. As I recall, Wilberforce was a black



and white tom. I bought this just the other day, actually."

She paused and then sniffled softly. "Violetta had been telling me for years that I dressed too dowdily. That I needed to add a bit of color to my wardrobe. I was out in Diagon Alley, and this caught my eye. I decided it was time I listened to her advice, so I went in and bought it. Do you like it?"

"Yes," he said softly. "I like the way it brings out your eyes."

Despite her best efforts, Dolores tittered again. Then, she glanced down again at the brooch before adjusting it slightly. The splash of color popped against her dark tweed jacket. A lithe white cat set against a lacquered background.

*A vivid pink background.*

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### ***The Forbidden Forest***

#### ***5 April 1994***

It was an hour after sunset when Jim Potter and Acting-Substitute DADA Professor Remus Lupin exited the secret passage via a tree stump in the Forbidden Forest. (Neither of them knew or could have known the role the tree stump would have played in a different history.) Dumbledore had asked Remus two days earlier to fill in for the deceased Rufus Scrimgeour, and as the older man had left surprisingly thorough lesson plans and had already written out the final exams for all seven years, Remus was happy to accept the temporary position.

Once out of the secret passage, Remus quickly cast the Umbrella Charm, for the rain was already starting to come down, the beginnings of the first thunderstorm to hit the

Hogwarts area in months. Jim followed, grumbling at the weather. Remus had advised him to refrain from casting the Umbrella Charm or any other magic, so he had to make do with a hooded rainslicker and a waterproof rucksack slung over his shoulder.

"Step lively, Jim!" Lupin called back. "We must move quickly to get there in time!"

The two wizards picked up the pace, and when the trail became impossible to follow, Remus disappeared, and a grey wolf took his place. Despite the cold rain, Jim smiled. He still wanted to fly, but a wolf might be fun as well.

*"Just so long as it's not a stag, a rat, or a snake,"* he thought as he rushed to keep up with the wolf.

Moments later, the wolf and his boy stepped out into clearing to behold a cave set in a hill. The wolf became a man once more and led Jim inside. Remus cast a Drying Charm on himself before starting a fire with a quick Incendio on a pile of wood he'd set up here a few days earlier.

"Take off your wet clothes," he said to the boy while tossing him a towel. "I can't dry them off with you wearing them. Your body must not be subjected to any other kind of magic until this process is over."

Jim nodded and quickly stripped down to his boxers before taking a moment to dry himself off with the towel as best he could. He still shivered in the cold, so he moved closer to the fire to warm himself. Meanwhile, Remus dug through the rucksack and pulled out a wooden box carved with intricate preservation runes. He tapped it once with his wand and then opened it. Inside was a small glass vial containing a pale green liquid.

"Ready?" he asked Jim. The boy nodded nervously.

"It's okay, Jim," Remus continued. "This next bit is easy if somewhat boring. Just sit at the edge of the cave and keep the vial held up so that it can catch the light of a lightning strike. You must hold the vial so that the light passes through the vial and into your eyes. You can only use your dominant hand, and once you hold the vial up, you can't put it down until the potion changes. If your arm starts to cramp up, let me know and I can try to massage it out, but I can't use any magic to relieve the pain nor help you to hold the vial up."

Jim nodded again and moved to the edge of the cave, with his wand in one hand and the vial in the other. The wand, he sat down beside him. It might or might not be needed later. Then, he did a few stretches, steeled himself, and held the vial up to face the night sky. He kept his Seeker's eye trained on it as if it were a Snitch ready to dart away in an instant. The rumbling in the distance grew louder as the storm worsened. Behind him, Remus quickly began to pull other items from the backpack: a few scented candles, an incense burner which he lit with a Muggle lighter rather than a wand, and several crystal goblets which he filled to varying levels with purified water and then arranged in a row near the fire.

After one minute of holding the vial aloft, Jim felt uncomfortable. After three, his right shoulder was starting to burn, and he began using his left arm to support the right at the elbow after confirming with Remus that it was allowed. Just at the five-minute mark, when he was grimacing in pain and just about to ask Remus to rub his shoulder, it happened. There was a flash of light and a crack of thunder, and luckily, Jim was holding the vial in the right position. Lightning lit up the sky, and for a second, the vial

itself gave off a flash that left spots before the boy's eyes. He blinked rapidly, and when his vision cleared, the pale green liquid was now dark red. It was the color of blood.

"Well done, Jim!" Remus exclaimed. "Now, quickly! It's time! You must *decide*!"

Jim and Remus had discussed this decision point many times over the months. The Animagus Potion was now primed for use but had to be drunk tonight. If Jim drank it now and did *nothing else*, he would not become an Animagus, or at least not instantly. He would have powerfully vivid dreams over the next few weeks that would guide him to his Animagus form, but from there, it would be a painstaking process of self-discovery that would take months or even years before he would actually be able to transform. But even if he never did, he would still have forevermore the dual-mind characteristic of Animagi that made them naturally resistant to Legilimency, which was the whole point of this exercise from the start.

Or ... Jim could drink the potion and say the incantation that Remus had taught him, while nearby, Remus invoked ritual magic he'd learned during a sojourn to Africa and refined over the last several years in Shamballa. If the ritual worked, Jim would become an Animagus within a few weeks at most. But he would be committed to the process. His Animagus form would become a part of his personality, influencing him in ways that were impossible to predict. Remus assured Jim that none of the resulting changes would be harmful to him, as they merely reflected hidden facets of his own soul. But they would be noticeable.

Oh, and he would also be an *illegal* Animagus too. If he got caught, it would be one more Potter scandal. Only this time, it would be his fault instead of his dad's.

Jim stared for one long terrible moment at the blood red elixir before pulling the stopper and throwing the foul-tasting liquid back. Fighting back the urge to gag, the boy coughed once before touching the tip of his wand to his heart. Then, he began to chant.

*"Amato Animo Animato Animagus! Amato Animo Animato Animagus! Amato Animo Animato Animagus!"*

Behind him, Remus smiled at the boy's Gryffindor brashness. While he'd warned the boy thoroughly about the consequences of using the ritual tonight, he'd never doubted which choice Jim would make. Quickly, Remus moved the incense burner so that it sat close enough for Jim to inhale the fumes. Then, he sat down next to the crystal goblets and began to run his wet fingers around the rims. Suddenly, the cave echoed with the eerie tones of the goblets.

If he were completely honest, Remus would admit that this part of the ritual was what worried him the most. Not because of any danger – he simply worried that lack of experience with this particular focus might cause him to make a mistake and ruin the magic for his young friend. He'd used crystal glasses successfully before, but he was much more proficient with the African shofar or, in a pinch, the pungi. But shofars were made from the horns of animals, while pungis were most strongly associated with Indian snake charmers. Given Jim's resistance to either stags or snakes as Animagus forms, Remus elected to avoid risk of the instruments' symbology affecting the magic.

*"Amato Animo Animato Animagus! Amato Animo Animato Animagus!"* Jim continued to chant, but his eyes began to swim in response to the sticky-sweet smell of the incense and the weird drone of the crystal glasses.

*"Amato Animo Animato Animagus! Amato Animo Animato Animagus!"* Then, just as the boy began to feel faint, there was a deafening crack of thunder, and his wand suddenly felt hot against his chest. It was time.

**"AMATO ANIMO ANIMATO ANIMAGUS!"** Jim screamed the incantation ... and then screamed again as his body seemed to stretch and warp. Suddenly, every inch of his skin *itched* madly as if things were crawling from his pores. From somewhere in the distance, he heard Remus call his name. Jim's eyes clamped shut as he was struck by a sudden vertigo, a terrible feeling of plunging ever downwards. But then, he forced his eyes opened and realized that he was actually falling *up*. Up and up, ever higher into the night sky. Jim screamed in terror, but the sound that emerged was a loud, high-pitched "CAAAAW!"

And then, Jim laughed as he realized – he was flying! Granted, he was flying out of control through a heavy thunderstorm, but he was flying! Not even the fact that his laughter came out as a strange birdlike trill fazed him. He tried to turn his head and feel his body with his hands, but his new head didn't seem to work that way, and instinct rather than intellect told him that his arms would not be doing anything other than flapping. Against the darkened sky, Jim Potter could see nothing of his animal form save that it was darker than any shadow.

As he flew on through the worsening storm, a strange delirium overtook the Boy-Who-Flew. He looked down and then banked around in a circle, searching first for the cave where he'd left Remus and then for Hogwarts. But he could see neither, only an inky blackness all around occasionally shattered by a flash of lightning. When that happened, Jim's mental confusion worsened as he could now see in colors he'd never noticed before, colors visible only to the eyes of

... whatever he was. Then, he felt himself drawn back towards the ground. To his surprise, Jim could see fires below. Strange green fires. He flew downwards.

As he descended, Jim's thoughts raced through his head, and he could hear a voice – his own voice – speaking in the language of birds. A strange babble at first, but it soon resolved itself into words he could hear in his own voice but which he did not understand.

*I am thought and memory. I stole the sun and moon and gave them back again. Shani rides my back, bringing justice and misfortune in equal measure. I wander in treachery and travel with unkindness.*

At last, he could make out the features of the ground below. The Forbidden Forest was gone. Jim didn't know where he was. But he knew a graveyard when he saw it, even if this one looked like it had been through a war, with smashed grave markers and grass blackened by fire. Dread overtook Jim, but he couldn't stop himself from flying closer. He was *meant* for this graveyard. He had *always* been meant for this graveyard.

*I watched as they cut off the head of Blessed Bran, but I know he is with us still. I guarded the tower against all enemies. I perched on Cu Chulainn's shoulder to tell him he was already dead. You should have seen the look on his face.*

With a loud squawk, Jim landed. He had a strange and terrifying sense of somehow being two things at once. He was a raven perched on a tombstone. He was a naked boy standing in a graveyard. He could see himself, boy and bird, with each of his twin selves staring at the other in confusion.

"*Weird*," said the bird. "*Caw!*" said the boy.

In the distance, at the base of the hill (much farther than he could have seen clearly before he gained a raven's vision), he could make out a huge cauldron with a fire burning underneath. Jim started towards it, though he could not tell if he were walking or flying or somehow both at once. He knew only that he could not stop moving.

*I am bloodshed and battle. I spied for Apollo and Wotan, flew with the Valkyries, and perched on the Hydra's tail. When I look into eyes of the dead, I can see all things past and future.*

On his left, Jim saw his mother and father standing hand-in-hand and gazing upon him with the adoration and pride.

"Mummy loves you," said Lily. "Never forget that."

"My little lion," said James. "Daddy loves you so much."

Lightning flashed, and then James and Lily were on the ground, their lifeless eyes still gazing upon him. Their arms were outstretched as if they were reaching for one another but were too far away to touch. Jim walked on.

To his right stood Ron Weasley, whose face bore a mask of profound sadness.

"I've got a secret, Jim," Ron said with a sniffle. "I'd give anything to tell you. But I just can't."

Lightning flashed, and now Ron was on the ground too, his eyes just as empty as Jim's parents, his face as pale and as cold as winter snow, as if all the life had literally drained out of him. A shattered wand, still smoking, lay near his outstretched hand. Jim walked on.



Nearer the cauldron, Jim saw Albus Dumbledore waiting for him and bearing an expression of immense pity. The old man's face was wet with tears.

"Jim, I'm sorry. I'm so *terribly* sorry."

Lightning flashed, and Dumbledore was on the ground as dead as the other three, though unlike them, his body bore the marks of a terrible battle: burns and cuts and a bloody gash from where the top of his wand hand had been sliced open. Jim walked on.

When he was almost at his destination, he saw Peter Pettigrew waving and smiling at him jovially, as if he was still Uncle Pete and always would be.

"Jim ... Sport, remember what I said. There's no good and no evil. Only power. I hope when the time comes, you choose wisely. But I'll always love you, either way."

Lightning flashed, and now Pettigrew was on the ground. If Dumbledore had looked as though he'd died in a great battle, Pettigrew looked as though he'd been butchered by an animal. His body was drenched with blood, most likely from the gaping wounds that had torn open his stomach and throat, though some blood undoubtedly came from the stump remaining where his wand hand had been severed at the wrist. Jim walked on.

Finally, he reached the clearing where the cauldron rested, and he stopped at the sight of the cloaked figure who floated in front of it a few feet off the ground. Jim felt a wave of unearthly cold wash over him. The figure looked like a Dementor, but it was not a Dementor. Human hands, one bearing a ring set with a polished black stone, reached up and threw back the hood. The Dementor's face looked

just like his own ... save for the lightning bolt scar that marred his temple.

*Creator, Trickster, Psychopomp, I fly in daylight and shadow, high above the living and deep below the lands of the dead. I watched Cain kill Abel and taught him how to hide the body.*

"The two who should be as one, set against each other in reckless hate," said Harry in a cold impassive voice. "We were always on our way here. This was always going to be where everything came together."

There was a gurgling sound from the cauldron behind Harry. Jim watched in horror as a figure slowly rose from whatever foul liquid bubbled inside and continued rising until he was floating in the air above and behind Harry. Unearthly pale skin, reptilian scales, and a noseless serpentine face that had haunted Jim's nightmares for most of his life.

"Tremble, Jim Potter," said Voldemort. "Tremble at my Apotheosis. Tremble and die. **AVADA KEDAVRA!**"

---

Jim fell to the ground with a scream and began to convulse with his hands clenched over his eyes as if to block out a terrifying vision. Frightened by his reaction, Remus threw a blanket over the nearly naked boy and pulled him up into a sitting position.

"Jim! JIM! Speak to me!"

With some difficulty, Remus pulled the boy's hands away from his face. But then, he gasped. Jim's familiar green eyes were gone. Instead, his irises were jet black and so large that the whites of his eyes were almost nonexistent.

"Jim," Remus whispered urgently. "Please! Focus on my voice! Come back to me!"

Jim's rapid breathing slowed. He put his hands back over his eyes as if to block out what little light was in the cave. After a moment, he pulled them away again, and his eyes had returned to normal. Remus exhaled.

"How ... how did I get back here?" Jim asked in a weak voice.

"You never left, Jim," Remus answered. "You had a vision relating to your Animagus form, but it was just a vision. You ... you went into convulsions for a bit, but it was no longer than a few seconds."

Lupin swallowed nervously. "What did you see?" he finally asked. "What is your Animagus form?"

Jim closed his eyes.

"Death," he said in a leaden voice. "I'm Death. Everyone I care about is going to die because of me."

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***Malfoy Manor***  
***6 April 1994***

The message had arrived two days earlier, delivered by Lord Wilkes's beautiful and distinctive snowy owl. It was rather terse as formal messages go, but then, Lucius Malfoy was well-aware of the writer's tendency to play his cards close to the vest ... when he wasn't gambling recklessly instead.

*My Lord Malfoy,*

*With your permission, I would like to pay a visit to Malfoy Manor at a time of your convenience to discuss a matter of personal concern.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Harry Black, Lord Wilkes*

Intrigued, Lucius sent an owl reply inviting the boy to lunch on the 9th of April. At the appointed time, Harry passed through the Floo to Malfoy Manor where he was greeted by his host. To Harry's disappointment, Lucius was alone in the manor (save for his house elves, of course). Apparently, Draco had elected to remain at Durmstrang over the Easter Holidays to catch up on his assignments (and, Lucius suspected, get in some extra training with his Quidditch team).

Lucius gave Harry a brief tour of the manor before they sat down to lunch, over which they discussed current events. Lucius commented on how hard the boy seemed to be taking both the death of Rufus Scrimgeour and the escape of Pettigrew and Rookwood, and he reassured Harry that none of those events were his fault. Harry was noncommittal on what recent events he did and did not consider to be his fault. They moved on to a discussion of James Potter's recent reversal of fortunes. Upon hearing that Harry had bankrupted his father to the point of acquiring his erstwhile family's ancient manse for his own use, Lucius praised the boy for his "most excellent revenge" against his father for past abuses. Harry started to demure but decided against it. He now knew a few things about Abraxas Malfoy and consequently about Lucius Malfoy's thoughts on sons revenging themselves against their bad fathers.

At last, the time came to discuss the subject matter that Harry wanted to raise, but he hesitated. To his annoyance, Lucius's Occlumency was good enough to prevent the young Leglimens's preternatural charm from finding anything to latch onto. It was a rare sensation he normally only experienced when dealing with Snape, Moody, and occasionally Dumbledore, but it was always annoying when it happened. By this point in his psychic training, Harry's skill at reading people was so intuitive that he felt practically naked when talking to someone against whom it didn't work. Fortunately, Lucius took pity on him.

"Lord Wilkes," he began. "Let us speak plainly, no matter how antithetical that is to persons such as ourselves. True, we are both Slytherins. But we are also both allies of convenience and fellow Lords of Ancient and Noble Houses. And most importantly, we have both sat upon the Hydra Throne, and so, we share membership in a very select fraternity. Now, you obviously wish to ask for some boon but are concerned as to whether I would be willing to grant it. And if so, what I will ask in return. And so, I say to you: *ask away*. The worst thing that might possibly happen is that I either say 'no' or else ask a price too high for you to pay."

Harry nodded. "Alright. I believe I know how to free Theo No-Name from the Ultimate Sanction."

Lucius crooked an eyebrow. "Do you indeed? Well, like most of our peers in the Wizengamot, I have no love at all for the Outcast, but my disdain is so great that it would prevent me from aiding him if an important ally asked me to do so ... and the price were right. You must know this, and yet you still hesitate to share your scheme. So why do you fear my disapproval of your plan?"

The boy took a deep breath. "Because if my plan succeeds, it will also rescue someone you hate a lot more than Theo from potential ruin. So I guess my question is: What do you want in exchange for helping my friend in a way that also helps Narcissa Black?"

Lucius leaned back in his chair, his eyes flashing. Harry proceeded to explain his idea, which did nothing to improve his host's disposition. After a few moments of tense questioning, Lucius directed Harry to depart, saying he would consider the proposal and respond within a few days, one way or the other.

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Two days later, Harry received an invitation to return to Malfoy Manor. Once there, Lucius got straight to the point.

"Your plan is feasible," he said. "But not guaranteed. And of course, there are things I will want in return."

Luckily, Harry didn't consider any of the Malfoy Lord's requirements to be deal-breakers. But to call some of them *surprising* was a gross understatement.

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## ***12 Grimmauld Place***

### ***9 April 1994***

Lord Sirius Black sat alone in the parlor at 12 Grimmauld studying the crossword puzzle from that morning's *Daily Prophet* when the fireplace flared to life and Severus Snape stepped through the Floo.

"Snappy!" Sirius exclaimed happily. "Good afternoon! What brings you to my humble commode?"

To Sirius's surprise, the Potions Master ignored both the "nickname" and the crude joke as he removed several potions from the satchel hanging from his shoulder.

"Nutrient potions," he said absentmindedly while placing the vials on the coffee table. Then, he sat down in the chair opposite Sirius's.

"Oh joy," Black snorted. "Between you and Ted Tonks, I'll be taking medications every waking hour. At least yours are good old-fashioned potions. Ted wants me to take some Muggle medicine that comes in pill form. Have you ever heard of *Clonazepam*?"

Snape shook his head in the negative, and Sirius finally noticed that the other man seemed utterly lost in thought.

"Severus? What is it? What's wrong?"

"On my way here, I had a meeting with my grandfather's former solicitor," he said slowly. "I am ... still processing what he told me."

"Which was?" Black asked cautiously.

Snape stared at the other man for several seconds as he recalled their strange bonding experience from the previous December when Harry had locked them in a room together for several hours. They'd emerged with a new understanding of each other, including just how much they'd had in common. Bizarrely, Snape suddenly realized that his old enemy might well be the only person with whom he could share what he'd learned and what it might mean.

"Do you remember all those months ago when we discussed my ... troubled childhood? And how I never understood how my mother could have ever ended up with

my father? Or why she never left him despite his mistreatment of us both?"

Sirius nodded slowly.

"Well, now I know," Snape said darkly.

"From your expression, I'm wondering if we're going to need another bottle of firewhiskey."

"Perhaps later," Severus paused to collect himself before beginning the tale.

"I've told you that my mother was the daughter of the last Lord Prince, and that by expelling her from the family for marrying a Muggle, he caused House Prince to effectively become extinct. Or at least dormant until Lucius Malfoy found a potential Heir so that we could work around the problem. But there were ... more details I didn't know until today."

"Go on."

"My mother was not just Lord Prince's daughter; she was his Heir. And in selecting her, my grandfather passed over her older brother and my uncle, Edward Prince."

"You never mentioned an uncle before."

"That is because I never knew he existed. My mother told me nothing of her family except her maiden name, and information about Edward Prince was kept out of public records. While my grandfather was undoubtedly a blood purist to some degree, Edward went farther. He vocally supported the Dark Lord from the earliest days of his rise and was recruited for the Knights of Walpurgis in the 1950's. This was long before the name of the movement



was changed to the Death Eaters. Edward was never marked, but it wasn't for lack of trying. My grandfather disapproved of Edward's affiliation and so he declared that my mother would become his chosen Heir instead. House Prince is ambilineal, so my mother's gender was no obstacle."

"So what happened?" Sirius asked.

"My mother finished Hogwarts in 1957 and immediately began a Potions Mastery of her own. Apparently, she too was a Potions prodigy in her youth. But then, in 1959, she abruptly withdrew from her apprenticeship to marry my father. But more than that, she wrote to my grandfather to inform of her decision and to say that she was madly in love with Tobias Snape and he with her. Along with the letter, she sent the fragments of her wand *which she voluntarily snapped herself*. And to ensure that my grandfather would not interfere in their marriage, she also announced that she and my father had sworn mutual Unbreakable Vows to remain faithful to one another to death and beyond."

Sirius blinked in confusion. "To death ... and beyond?"

"The vow not only ensured that they would remain bound together for the rest of their lives, it also forbade each of them from remarrying or even pursuing a future romantic relationship after the death of the other!"

"But hang on! Can you even bind a Muggle to an Unbreakable Vow?"

"Oh yes," Snape answered while waving his hand distractedly. "An Unbreakable Vow requires a wizard to act as bonder. That is whose magic fuels the Vow. The participants must fully understand that the Vow can kill oathbreakers, and so the Statute of Secrecy generally

prevents its use against Muggles, but if a Muggle knows about magic and willingly accepts the risk, then the Vow can bind him."

Snape's expression grew haunted. "The Vow not only removed my mother from the Wizarding world, it ensured that she would never be a viable marriage partner for any wizard nor ever be able to produce an Heir of her own that met the family's blood status requirements. The Prince family charter left my grandfather with no option but to replace my mother with Edward as the Heir. He formally struck my mother from the family tree but only after she had already rejected the family herself."

Sirius's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "That all seems ... improbable. And since Uncle Ed was an aspiring Death Eater, I'm guessing there was more to the story?"

"Indeed. Just a few months before I was born, Edward Prince took the Heirship Oath. House Prince has a special oath that must be sworn by all Heirs upon taking the ring. Among other things, it contains a vow to preserve the welfare of all other family members. I suppose I don't have to tell you how unusual such an oath is among Pureblooded families. According to Mr. Fortescue, immediately upon swearing that oath, Edward screamed and fell to the ground wracked by agony. He had lost his magic! And the shock of it would kill him just a few days later! But before passing, he gave a deathbed confession revealing that Boruslav Lestrage had provided him with a potion – essentially Amortentia laced with a compulsion philter – that Edward illicitly gave to my parents after arranging for them to meet seemingly by happenstance.

"If the scheme had succeeded, Edward would have been rewarded with the Dark Mark upon becoming Lord Prince,

which would have happened just as soon as my grandfather suffered a '*tragic accident*.' But Edward failed to realize that the oath he swore treated what he'd done to my mother as a continuing violation. Even though he'd given my mother the potion before becoming Heir, the fact that she was still under its effects when he swore the oath meant that he was immediately in breach and suffered judgment."

Sirius stiffened in his chair. "Wait a minute! So your grandfather knew what Edward had done to your mother and still expelled her from the family?!"

"Apparently so," Snape replied. "He had two children. One was dead. The other was magically bound to a Muggle, which I imagine he considered a fate worse than death. My grandfather might not have been a supporter of the Dark Lord, but he was still as bigoted towards Muggles as the average Pureblood. In any case, there was nothing to be done to free my mother from her marriage, so he used his influence to sweep everything under the rug and avoid scandal. Then, he resigned himself to the inevitable extinction of his family name. According to Fortescue, he withdrew from public life and spent the next few years drinking himself into a continual stupor before he finally passed away."

"And in the meantime," Sirius said with a horrified realization, "I reckon the Amortentia finally wore off!"

"An accurate deduction. I was raised by two people from completely different worlds who had never loved one another and who, after the potion wore off, grew to hate each other instead because each of their lives had been ruined by the false love they'd experienced. And yet, neither could leave the marriage without them both dying.

And so they stayed together to wallow in their mutual bitterness. Oh, and to raise a child that neither of them ever wanted, I suppose."

"Bloody hell," Sirius muttered. "One question, though. I know why your selfish prick of an uncle used that potion on your mother. But why did Edward pick your father of all people?"

"According to Mr. Fortescue" Snape said bitterly, "Tobias Snape was picked *entirely at random*. Edward arranged for my mother to visit Cokesworth for some reason and slipped her the potion there. Then, he gave the second potion to the first Muggle of the appropriate age who crossed her path."

He shook his head in amazement. "And it was all part of a scheme to align House Prince with the Death Eaters, a terrorist group I myself would later join because I thought they would help me reclaim the same birthright that they had helped to steal from me in the first place before I was even born! And do you know what the worst part is?"

Sirius shook his head silently.

"I don't even have anyone I can be angry at," the man snapped. "Because except for me, everyone involved is already dead!"

There was a lengthy silence from both men after Snape's final outburst. At last, Sirius spoke again.

"So ... firewhiskey?"

Despite himself, Snape barked out a laugh. He'd been wise to come here.

"*Merlin's Bones, YES!*"

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**10 April 1994**

On the morning of Saturday, April 10th, Sirius Black (and his various houseguests) were all understandably surprised by the Patronus wolf that suddenly manifested atop the dining room table at breakfast.

*"Hello, Sirius," the wolf said in the voice of Remus Lupin. "This is Remus Lupin. If it is convenient, I would like to meet with you tomorrow for lunch at the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade. I will have a room reserved for us upstairs. A lot of things have changed for us, both over the last thirteen years and in the last few weeks. Out of respect for the friendship we once had, I think it would be best if we met face to face to discuss these changes, as well as what the status of our relationship will be going forward or if there will even be such a relationship. If that day is inconvenient, please send word to me through Severus Snape or Madam Rosmerta. Otherwise, I look forward to seeing you at noon tomorrow."*

As the wolf Patronus faded away, Sirius continued to stare in surprise at the spot where it had stood, while the others at the table (the Tonkses, Bellatrix, Buck, and Regulus) began to chatter. Most of them were bemused by the message, but Regulus's reaction was grimmer.

"Are you going?" he asked in clipped tones.

Sirius looked shaken. "I ... suppose I should. I've wanted to get in touch with Moony once things calmed down a bit. This seems like a good opportunity."

"I'll come along then," Regulus replied, ignoring Sirius's objection. "I don't want you going out *anywhere* by yourself, seeing as how that little scheme Harry's cooking up with

Lucius is probably about to put a target on your back. But you're absolutely not going into a meeting with a werewolf alone."

"Harry and Severus both say he's not a werewolf anymore," Sirius insisted.

"Indulge my paranoia," Regulus said commandingly. "I'll stay downstairs in a different form, but I'm going."

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### ***The Three Broomsticks*** ***11 April 1994***

The next day, the Black brothers stepped out of the Floo and into the Three Broomsticks. Regulus wore casual robes but otherwise resembled a Muggle named Gordon Brown who was presently serving in the British government as the Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer. Regulus had seen a photo of the Muggle in the Times, but he thought the politician was obscure enough that no one in Hogsmeade could possibly recognize him. He elected to stay in the common area and order lunch on his own while Sirius made his way alone upstairs to Room 12.

Sirius knocked on the door and entered when bade. Then, he froze in shock. The room had been cleared of furniture except for a large circular table with three chairs. Directly across from Sirius sat Remus Lupin. To his left ... sat *James Potter*.

"Please come in, Sirius," Remus said.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Sirius said in a low voice while glaring at James.

"I've had worse ideas I suppose," the erstwhile werewolf answered. "But if you will look around, you will notice the walls are covered by runic carvings."

Sirius pulled his eyes off James with difficulty and looked around. And indeed, the walls were covered with dozens of small wooden squares, each of which had what looked like Chinese characters painted on them, characters that had an oddly soothing effect on the wizard.

"The runes will temporarily counteract the effects of the Oath of Enmity," Remus continued, "so that the only animosities you will feel for each other during this meeting are those based on legitimate emotions. Jim Potter asked me to meet with James, just as Severus asked me to meet with you. As neither of you sought me out, and as I have things to say to both of you, I decided to invite you here together under a truce so we could have it all out at once. Considering the friendship we shared in our youth, I think we all owe that much to one another."

Sirius nodded and cautiously made his way around the table to sit opposite James (who for once, looked quiet and chastened).

"I wouldn't have thought it would be that easy to get around an Oath of Enmity," Sirius said. Remus chuckled.

"*Easy* is a relative term. I spent eight hours yesterday carving and inscribing these Zen meditation runes. They cannot simply be transfigured into shape or the magic won't work. Each one must be done by hand, and all of them together will only last for an hour or so after activation. So their utility for creating '*neutral ground*' is limited."

Sirius slid into his chair. "Fair enough. So, where do we begin?"

James started to speak, but Remus cut him off. "First things first. I believe the first order of business is to make sure we're all on the same page, at least in terms of what the Marauders *were* back in the day. Only then can we decide what, if anything, the Marauders are today."

With that, he turned to James. "Jealous Aardvarks Make Excellent Soup," he said, a phrase which confused Sirius even as it made James blink rapidly. Then, Remus turned to Sirius.

"Sinister Investment Returns Imitate Unusual Stocks."

Now, it was Sirius's turn to feel his mind reel as he too remembered the *truth* of the Marauders and their time in the Shrieking Shack. How he, James, and Peter had agreed to years of memory locks from the Unspeakables in exchange for learning to become Animagi. How the Marauders' Map had started out as an Unspeakable tracking device that Sirius had impulsively stolen and then, with help from the others, modified into a silly pranking tool.

Meanwhile, James suddenly realized that the life debt he'd been holding over Snape's head for over a decade was a fabrication, and he immediately recalled how Snape really came to harm in the Shrieking Shack. To his shame, he also recalled that on that fateful night, he'd considered trying to reunite Snape and Lily only to lose those memories completely before he could even begin. Meanwhile, Sirius was astonished to realize that Snape had never truly been endangered by The Prank, and that the guilt Sirius had



both felt and repressed over the matter was ultimately pointless.

"Does Severus know the truth about the Prank?" Sirius asked.

"He does now, though his memories were only recently returned. Severus was the one who suggested I unlock both your memories."

James crooked an eyebrow. "Is everyone on a first name basis with Snape but me now?"

Sirius glared at his former best friend. "I'll put it to you this way, Potter. I *strongly* advise you to *not* call him Snivellus around me!"

"Likewise," Remus added. "Once Severus's own memories were restored, I immediately went to him and apologized for my behavior during our school days. I shall be returning to Shamballa for the summer if not longer, but I will remain in correspondence with him. As you might imagine, I've become something of an expert on Animagery, and I believe that it, rather than the Belby Formula, may hold the key to curing lycanthropy for good."

He chuckled. "Once you get to know him, he's surprisingly likeable in a '*surly curmudgeon*' sort of way."

Sirius laughed as well. "You've got that right."

James looked back and forth between his two former friends as if he no longer recognized them. "I ... literally have no response for that. Look, I didn't come here to discuss Sni... I mean, Severus Snape. But if you two want me to buddy up with him to make things right between us, I'll do it."

"James," Remus said sadly. "I didn't ask you here to offer *terms* for reviving our friendship. As I said, I just wanted to clear the air between us. And also, I suppose, to see what if anything can be done about the Oath of Enmity. I know Jim is very upset about the current state of affairs, and I suspect Harry is as well. I've grown quite fond of both boys, and I *refuse* to take any side in your ridiculous feud."

With that, he looked over to Sirius, who at least had the decency to look abashed.

"Well, first of all," Black said, "I suspect if you try to '*buddy up*' to Severus, he may hex you into a stinky goo. As for the Oath of Enmity," he paused and looked away for a moment, "I ... regret invoking it."

Then, he looked back at James with a stern expression. "Not that you don't *deserve it*, mind you. I still think your treatment of Harry was a travesty. But ... it was wrong of me to invoke a House Oath without considering how it would affect him. And your other son, I suppose."

He took a deep breath. "*If* you and yours can make it the requisite year-and-a-day without reciprocating, I *suppose* I will rescind the Oath. *Do not* think that we're going back to being blood brothers, James. Not until you've earned Harry's forgiveness and mine."

James ran his fingers through his hair. "Sirius ... have you talked with Harry about ... about our *situation* since last week?"

Sirius glowered. "No. Harry's actually still angry with me over the Oath, and he's been avoiding me. Why?"

James licked his lips. "I've ... lost everything basically, including my job. Peter mostly wiped me out financially, and

the balance of the Potter fortune is going to Harry, including control of my House votes and possession of the Manor for at least the foreseeable future. I'm actually in the middle of packing the few things I'll be allowed to take with me, but I have to be out by the end of next month. I'll even have to give him my old Invisibility Cloak!"

"If you're expecting sympathy...!" Sirius began.

"I'm not! I swear! But Sirius ... if you still want me to *atone* for how I treated Harry, I ... I just don't have anything left to give. Well, except for my life, and I actually offered that *twice* and both times he came up with alternatives."

He gave a sad laugh. "Ironically, before you made the Oath against me, I'd actually had hopes that once he was out of House Potter, emancipated and financially independent, I could finally try to develop a real relationship with him. Not as father and son, obviously, but ... something."

"But only *after* he was out of House Potter," Sirius said. "Why, James? Why was it so important to banish your own Heir?" He sneered. "Did you blast him off the Potter family tapestry like Walburga did to me?"

James shook his head. In retrospect, he could see how the whole situation must have looked to Sirius, although he wasn't thinking that way at the time.

"My reasons for wanting Harry expelled from the family ...." He stopped and shook his head. "Look, all I can say now is that I had my reasons. And more importantly, *Harry knew what they were and went along with them*. So talk to him about it. He and I are both under secrecy oaths but ... talk to Harry. If he says that he wants you to know why I had to do it, I'll take steps to reveal those secrets to you. But only if

he wants it, and he may have good reasons to say no. It's ... kind of an awful family secret."

Sirius looked at his old friend with a dubious expression before shaking his head and moving on.

"Alright, I'll set that aside for now," he said while turning to Remus. "Now that my memories have been restored, Moony, it occurs to me that ... you spent *a lot* of time lying to us all when we were at school."

Remus was unrepentant. "Only from a certain point of view. Whenever we were in the Shrieking Shack, you always knew the whole truth, and you understood why you would not be allowed to keep those memories the rest of the time and acquiesced." He frowned. "Also, *Moony* isn't really a fitting nickname anymore since my *furry little problem* appears to have been solved. I am not at liberty to disclose the details, but suffice to say, I am no longer a werewolf but rather a wolf Animagus."

James stared in amazement and then broke out into a grin. "But that's wonderful, Remus! I'm so happy for you."

"Me too," said Sirius merrily. "I guess we need a new wolf-themed nickname for you."

Remus, who had never been a fan of Sirius's nicknaming habit, demurred. "Well, since my *actual* name carries a wolf-theme, perhaps we could just stick with that for now."

The three Marauders talked and reminisced, treading as carefully as possible around all the landmines that now littered their relationship. Sirius invited Remus to come visit him at 12 Grimmauld Place ... and then immediately regretted inviting his ex-werewolf friend to the home where his werewolf-phobic brother still lived. James started to

invite Remus to visit his home as well before freezing halfway through when he remembered where his home was going to be for the foreseeable future.

It was a difficult and fraught conversation between the three men. Each of them had made terrible mistakes that had hurt the others. Each of them knew dangerous secrets they couldn't reveal. And each of them still held powerful grudges that held them back from truly renewing their friendship. But it was a start. Then, after about forty minutes, Sirius abruptly stood and announced that the sound of James's voice was suddenly giving him the urge to cast Castration Hexes so the runes were probably running out of magic.

And that was the end of the Marauders reunion.

Meanwhile, downstairs in the common area, Regulus struggled to eat his shepherd's pie in peace while steadfastly ignoring the gaggle of upper-year Muggle Studies students who were revising for an exam at a nearby table. From what he could tell by eavesdropping, they were arguing in heated whispers about whether or not Gordon Brown, the Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, was secretly a wizard who'd come to the Three Broomsticks for lunch and if so, would he be willing to explain certain elements of the Maastricht Treaty for them.

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## ***Hogwarts***

### ***13 April 1994***

On April 12th, the Hogwarts Express returned the students who'd left for Easter Break. To Harry, the journey was somewhere between amusing and aggravating. By now, his name change was common knowledge, as was his Lordship

over House Wilkes. The reaction he'd gotten from students in the past from being the Potter Heir was nothing compared to being an actual Lord and easily the youngest in living memory. Likewise, Amy Wilkes was bemused by the reaction of her Slytherin peers after going from "orphaned waif from a disgraced family" to "adopted little sister of one of the richest boys in the world." Daphne Greengrass had come up to her as if they were best friends and offered her "a make-over," a suggestion that was almost met with derisive laughter before Amy remembered that she was still supposed to be acting like a blood purist in order to infiltrate the CPS.

To Ginny Weasley's chagrin, the CPS had also been a source of discord in the Weasley household. As she explained while riding in the carriage back to Hogwarts with Harry and Amy, her parents had thrown a birthday party for the Twins, their first one celebrated at the Burrow since they'd started at Hogwarts. It ended abruptly with the twins throwing cake at one another before devolving into a fist fight and then both of them getting grounded for the rest of the Easter Break.

Which was when Ginny's own club affiliation came up....

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***1 April 1994 (Twelve days earlier)***  
***The Burrow***

"Honestly!" George snapped at Fred while wiping cake from his face. "You're just getting worse and worse! You're already selling dangerous pranks to the CPS wankers. You'll be going to their Junior Death Eater meetings next!"

The Twins had been sent to their room by their furious parents, but the other three Weasleys in residence followed

them upstairs.

"Are you calling our little sister a Junior Death Eater, you git!" Fred bellowed while reaching for his wand only for Percy to snatch it out of his hand.

Then, Ron piped up to try and change the subject. "So what are those CPS meetings like, anyway? *Are they* like Junior Death Eater meetings?"

Ginny snorted. "Well no one has been praising You-Know-Who or anything. Or at least not that I've heard." Then, she added ruefully. "I've been hearing the M-word more often than I'm comfortable with, I suppose."

"Then why do you even go if they're all a bunch of bigots?" George asked.

She shrugged. "Not all of them are. Not even most of them. And anyway, somebody's got to keep an eye on them. Might as well be me. Nobody gives me any guff for being there because I can just look down my nose at them and say something snide about *The Sacred 28*."

"Ginny!" exclaimed Percy in a scandalized tone. The Weasley family's membership in the so-called Sacred 28 was a source of perpetual embarrassment to the famously Muggle-supporting family. Ron had a different reaction though.

"I *knew* it!" he exclaimed in outrage. "Harry Black has turned you into a *spy*!"

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***Now ...***

"If nothing else, that at least distracted everyone from the Twin's feud. All four of them were furious over their *little baby sister* falling in with *a bad crowd* on your say-so."

Harry smirked. "Wonderful. Well, feel free to make me the villain if it helps you out at home. So did the Twins ever make up?"

"Not yet. In fact, George has started sleeping in Bill's old room since he's hardly ever home. For which Fred mocks George for '*trying to soak up Bill's head boy vibes*,' whatever that means. I don't know what to do to get them on good terms again. Mum and Dad are very upset over it, and Percy's going spare."

"Hmm. Have you tried crying?" Harry asked. Ginny glared at him.

"I'm not a little girl, Harry!"

"Please," Amy said with a laugh. "I've *seen you* manipulate your brothers with strategic crying. If you've got a weapon in your arsenal that they don't have any defense against, don't be afraid to use it. That's just silly Gryffindor thinking."

The girl rolled her eyes. "I'll bear that in mind."

"Good," said Harry. "Next item of business: After dinner tonight, meet me next to the broom cupboard three doors down from Moaning Myrtle's toilet. I have something to show you."

At the appointed time and spot, Harry met the two Slytherin girls and ushered them into a broom closet full of especially pungent cleaning supplies.



"Phew!" Ginny said while waving her hand under her nose. "Great place for a secret meeting, Harry."

"Sorry, but the smell is necessary," he replied. "Otherwise, the upper years would be in here snogging all the time, and we can't have that. Now, pay attention."

He pointed out an odd, barely noticeable scratch on a shelf and then tapped it with his wand. The entire shelf rotated 45 degrees to reveal a secret passageway. He then led the two girls inside and down a long and twisting corridor. After a few minutes of walking, they came across a ladder mounted into the corridor wall. Harry climbed down through a hole in the floor, and after looking at each other in surprise, the two girls followed. At the bottom was another secret door which Harry opened with another tap of his wand. The three passed through the door to enter yet another corridor. Both girls looked around in confusion.

"This is Prefect's Row!" Ginny exclaimed. "Did you just take us through ten minutes of secret passages just to get somewhere we could have easily walked to in four?!"

Harry smiled. "Not just Prefect's Row, Ginny. It's the end of Prefect's Row, about ten feet past where the Notice-Me-Not Charms start. I decided it was too conspicuous walking straight down Prefect's Row to get here. There are other secret routes here I'll show you later."

"And where exactly is '*here*' supposed to be?" asked Amy. Harry just smiled and turned to the blank wall at the end of the corridor.

"Fierce Blue Puppy," he said.

In response, a doorway appeared and opened. The two girls followed him through and then stopped to gape in surprise

and wonder at the massive Hydra Throne. Theo No-Name and the two Slytherin Prefects, Titus Mitchell and Selena Harper, were already seated at the table in front of the Throne.

"Welcome, ladies," Harry said expansively. "To the Prince's Lair!"

"If you keep recruiting, Harry, we'll need some extra chairs," Titus quipped.

"Not yet," Harry said as he causally sat down on the Throne, to the surprise of both prefects.

"Congratulations, Harry," Selena said. "Or should we start calling you Your Highness now?"

"Pfft. Harry's fine, thank you."

With that, Harry gave the two confused Second Years a brief overview of the Prince of Slytherin, including the fact that he now held the position ... and the fact that by entering the room, the girls were now bound by a nonconsensual oath to never reveal anything they'd learned in here.

"Oookay," Ginny said weakly. "Anything else we should know?"

"My brother Niles has a crush on you," Selena announced.

"I've noticed. But he's a bit too into the bad side of CPS for me. Speaking of which, I see you and Mitchell are surprisingly okay with Theo being here."

"Indeed," Titus drawled. "Neither of us is actually under the Sanction, so we worked out a schedule at the start of the

year of when we'd each make a big show of being rude to him while also protecting him from Slytherin bullies '*under Snape's orders.*' It's worked out so far."

Selena nodded. "As for Niles, I'll be having a little chat with him soon about the crowd he's hanging out with."

Conversation with the prefects (who Ginny noticed were both remarkably deferential to Harry despite him being a mere Third Year) continued for a few minutes before Selena and Titus had to leave. Selena had a study session scheduled. Titus, on the other hand, was off to a late-night poker game. Apparently, Blaise had introduced the Muggle game the year before and it had taken off among the upper year students. Even more surprisingly, Titus mentioned that Percy was involved and was a surprisingly good card player. Titus blamed it on the Gryffindor's NEWT-level Arithmancy studies.

After the prefects were gone, Harry answered a few more questions from the girls before dropping another bombshell. "*Tom Marvolo Riddle is the dark wizard known as Lord Voldemort.*" Hearing the Secret spoken aloud was unnerving for both girls, even though they'd already learned from Theo that the list of things Riddle and Voldemort had in common could fill pages.

"So Voldemort is just a fake name Riddle assumed while hiding his true identity under a Fidelius?" Amy asked.

"Yes," Harry said before hesitating briefly. "And I think he may have had others, though Lord Voldemort was the only one magically concealed."

Even Theo was surprised at that. "What other names do you think he might have used?" he asked.

"Before I get into that," Harry replied. "What can you tell me about Cantankerous Nott?"

"Which one?"

Harry did a double-take. "Seriously? There was more than one wizard cursed with parents dumb enough to name him *Cantankerous*?"

"Well, to be fair, one of them was the father of the other, so apparently the elder Cantankerous didn't mind his name too much. Cantankerous Nott Sr. was my great-grandfather. By all accounts, he anonymously wrote *The Sacred 28*. Horribly bigoted. Was into illegal Muggle-hunting. His son, Cantankerous Nott Jr. was my grandfather and a chip off the old block. Oh, and both of them were pretty openly supportive of Grindelwald, to the point that the family had to pay a lot of bribes to hush it up after Grindelwald lost. Senior died back in the 50's, some incident with Muggle-baiting that went fatally wrong somehow. Junior was working on an updated *Sacred 28* when he was assassinated by an Irish Muggleborn terrorist named Rian O'Grady. That was in 1970, I think. My father became Lord Nott while he was still at school."

"What was Tiberius's relationship with his father?"

"A whole lot better than my relationship with him!" Theo spat. "He idolized both his father and grandfather as icons of blood purist philosophy!"

Harry said nothing at first. Then, he popped out his wand and spelled "*Rian O'Grady*" in the air with the Pyrologos Charm. After studying the name for a moment, he slashed his wand through the air. The letters of the name moved around to form a different name.

*Dorian Gray.*

"Who's Dorian Gray?" Amy asked.

"He's the main character from a book called *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by a Muggle named Oscar Wilde. Wilde was Tom Riddle's favorite author when he was a student. The novel was about a man who's secretly evil, but no one knows it because his evil nature is hidden in a magical portrait to which his soul is somehow connected. The portrait ages instead of him. As long as it's intact, he can't age or die."

Theo's eyes widened. "That ... sounds kind of like a Horcrux, Harry."

The other boy nodded without taking his eyes off the name floating in the air, while Theo explained to the horrified girls about Voldemort's Horcruxes, one of which was the Diary that had enslaved Ginny's brother.

"Harry," Amy asked cautiously. "What does this mean?"

Harry took a deep breath. "Here's what we know: Tom Marvolo Riddle was Sorted into Slytherin in 1938. During his first five years, he was an active supporter of Muggleborn rights and made enemies out of the most prominent Purebloods at school back then. At some point during his Fifth Year, he became Prince of Slytherin. He then used the resources of the position to gain access to the Chamber of Secrets so that he could use the Basilisk to petrify Muggleborns as part of a plot to frame Abraxas Malfoy and other Slytherin Purebloods. That plan fell apart when he accidentally killed Myrtle Warren and then destroyed his own capacity for empathy in an Occlumency mishap. After that, he seemingly abandoned the cause of Muggleborn rights in favor of currying favor with blood

purists. When he returned as a Sixth Year, he was already wearing the Gaunt Lord's ring. The Throne won't tell me much about Tom from his school days, but it did reveal that Cantankerous Nott—*Junior*, I suppose—used to mock him for wearing a Lord's ring when he wasn't really entitled to do so on account of being a Halfblood. Around that time, Riddle also developed close relationships with classmates Augustus Rookwood and Boruslav Lestrangle.

"Riddle graduated in 1945 but then basically disappeared for over a decade before showing back up to apply for the DADA Professor's job in 1957. Dumbledore turned him down, but by an interesting coincidence, *that same year* was when the curse on the DADA job began! After that, Tom Riddle disappeared in 1962... which was right around the time his old school friend Nobby Leach became the first Muggleborn Minister for Magic! This was also around the time that Alexander McAvity started pushing for Muggleborn Rights throughout Britain ... and *Rian O'Grady* first appeared on the scene as one of McAvity's top lieutenants. I looked him up. There's no record of Rian O'Grady *anywhere* before then.

"Throughout the 1960's, the Muggleborns pushed harder and harder for civil rights, but frequently in ways that provoked increasing fear and hostility from conservative Purebloods, including lots of extremist ideas that seem *designed* to provoke a backlash in the Wizengamot. In 1968, Leach died mysteriously in office and McAvity was framed for various crimes and exiled to Australia. In their absence, the civil rights movement they created turned violent. Most of the leadership died or fled Britain. In 1970, the last of them, O'Grady, murdered Cantankerous Nott Jr. in a very public way that stirred up more hatred against Muggleborns. Then, O'Grady himself simply disappeared.

"Meanwhile, Riddle had started using the name Lord Voldemort behind the scenes throughout the 1960's. He hid the connection between Riddle and Voldemort under a Fidelius, and under the Voldemort identity, he recruited a new generation of Pureblood followers who had been radicalized by the previous ten years of aggressive Muggleborn extremism – extremism that Riddle had *also* been pushing under a *different* fake identity. For instance, Cantakerous Jr.'s death at the hands of 'Rian O'Grady' cleared the way for Tiberius Nott to claim Lordship of an Ancient and Noble House, and right after he left school, Tiberius became a Death Eater, unwittingly serving the same man who killed his own father and, for all I know, his grandfather too."

"Wait, wait, wait!" Ginny exclaimed. "Are you saying that all this time, You-Know-Who has been on *both sides* of the blood purity debate?!"

"Yes," Harry answered. "He's been pushing the extremists on both sides. Heightening the conflict between Purebloods and Muggleborns so that they fight each other, while using radicalized Muggleborns and later the Death Eaters to take out moderates on both sides as well as anyone, like Cantankerous Jr., who might have gotten in his way."

"But ... why?" Amy asked.

Harry fumed. "That I don't know. But I'll tell you one thing. Lord Voldemort did *not* start a bloody insurrection that ripped the whole country apart just because of *blood purity!*"

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***Nott Hall***  
***19 April 1994***

With a loud crack, the cue-ball struck the last billiard ball on the table, and it flew unerringly into the corner pocket. Tiberius Nott turned to his house guest with a victorious sneer.

"That's two games to zero, Malfoy," Tiberius said snidely. "Have you never played nine-ball before?"

"I have actually," Lucius replied. "Though admittedly, I've always preferred traditional billiards over these modern Muggle variants. I'm sure my luck will change."

The other Death Eater snorted. "Tis a game of skill, not luck, Malfoy. But if you think otherwise, perhaps we should place a bit of coin on the next game. Say 100 galleons a ball?"

"Why not?" Lucius answered languidly while swirling his glass of port. "It will liven things up, I suppose, if we wager a bit of pocket change on it."

Nott's eye twitched at the reminder of his guest's substantially greater wealth. "... Indeed."

Then, he walked over to the nearby bar to pour himself another drink even as he re-racked the billiard balls with a flick of his wand. "I must say, Lucius, I was a bit surprised when you asked to meet with me to discuss '*Wizengamot business*.' I wasn't sure we still had any common ground, politically speaking."

"On the contrary, I think you'll find that my politics have not changed at all. Merely the means by which I pursue them."

"Oh?" Nott scoffed. "The last time we sat together in the Wizengamot, I watched in disbelief as you helped a



*Mudblood* claim a Noble Seat! What would our Lord think of that, I wonder?"

"Wonder all you like, Tiberius, but I imagine he'll think me quite resourceful for reactivating a wealthy Noble House and then delivering it for the next *eleven years* into the regency of Severus Snape, who also bears our Lord's Mark. Just as I'm sure he'll be delighted by the level of influence I hold over the new Lord Wilkes. You're good at sports, Nott. But you've never learned how to play a truly *long* game."

"Pah! Am I to be impressed at how you grovel before Potter's whelp?"

Lucius laughed. "Obviously, you've not kept up with the latest gossip. Harry *Black* is a Slytherin through-and-through. When the Wizengamot next meets, James Potter will announce his *fealty* to the House of Wilkes. Assuming, of course, that Potter isn't so humiliated by the *financial ruin* Lord Wilkes has visited upon him that he declines to show his face, in which case the Wilkes Seneschal can make the announcement instead."

Nott was temporarily speechless. "House Potter? A vassal to the very son he cast out?"

"Quite so," the blond aristocrat said in silky tones. "Harry Black will control 22 votes *on his own* without even counting the votes of those Houses allied with him. And I helped make it happen, a fact Lord Wilkes will not soon forget."

Malfoy gave a cruel laugh. "In fact, with luck and perseverance, I may be able to persuade Harry Black to take the Dark Mark as soon as he finishes Hogwarts. Assuming the plan to revive our fallen Lord has succeeded by then, of course."

Lucius's words hung in the air, and he scrutinized Tiberius's reactions closely while taking another sip of port. For his part, Nott's outrage over the thought of Harry Black joining the Death Eaters was instantly eclipsed by his worry over Malfoy's reference to Voldemort's resurrection. Narcissa Black had told him that Lucius was ignorant of their plans for that, but Malfoy's words suggested he might know more than she'd realized. Inwardly, Nott cursed the fact that Malfoy had requested a Lord-to-Lord meeting under the parley terms of the Wizengamot Charter, and so the price of murdering the arrogant popinjay here and now was far higher than Nott was willing to pay.

"So that's your game," he said sullenly before positioning his stick against the cue ball. There was a loud crack as the diamond pattern of billiard balls broke, though no balls went into any pockets. He stood up straight and glared at Malfoy.

"You want to control Harry Black," he continued. "And through him, you want to control the Wilkes estate! Has he found the lost vault yet?"

"We'll be addressing Mr. Toymaker's legacy this summer after school is out," Lucius said casually, even as he glided around the table. "But make no mistake. When Harry Black acquires whatever *special project* Mr. Toymaker was working on for the Dark Lord, I shall be standing by his side."

Then, he chuckled wryly. "And to think – I didn't even have to marry him and then *rape him* in order to achieve it!"

Nott's face clouded in anger. "Did you instruct the brat to cancel my marriage contract? To undo my plans and steal

the glory I would have claimed and delivered to the Dark Lord?!"

"Oh, I hardly needed to instruct young Harry. He's quite clever, you know. For the most part, he defeated you all by himself. Besides, your *plans* would have taken years to come to fruition and would have drawn the scorn and revulsion of all Wizarding Britain. And *still* would have likely failed when Amaryllis Wilkes died on a Healer's table along with any unborn child that she tried to carry at such a young age while under the effects of a dangerous and highly-illegal Gender-Affixing Potion."

With that, Lucius bent over the table and prepared to take his shot. Then, he paused, stood, and studied the tip of his cue for a moment before pulling his wand from its hidden pocket. He tapped it three times against the cue before raking it quickly up the side. There was a loud POP as a few sparks shot from the top of the pool cue, a sign that Lucius had just casually sliced through the Bad Aim Jinx that his host had spent hours carefully inscribing onto the cue.

"A very droll jest, Nott," he said almost sweetly. "Or at least, I shall do you the courtesy of assuming it was a prank and not a deliberate effort to cheat me."

As Nott's teeth gnashed together in a fury, Lucius bent back over the table and struck the cue ball forcefully. It hit one ball at an angle and bounced off it to strike another. Both balls went into different pockets.

"I believe you said 100 galleons a ball?" Lucius asked mockingly.

"Damn you, Malfoy!" Nott snapped even as he slammed his glass down onto the edge of the table. Some of the port sloshed out onto the felt. "To hell with this game! To hell

with *all* your games! Why did you even come here today except to *mock me*?!"

"It is as I said, Nott – Wizengamot business!" Lucius said while leaning back over the table to knock another ball into a corner pocket.

"I have gained Lord Wilkes as an ally, and one thing I've learned is that the secret to maintaining alliances is *to keep your allies happy*. Or at least, as happy as you can make them without losing more than the alliance is worth. Harry Black is a Slytherin and can be quite ruthless to his enemies. But he has an almost Hufflepuffian loyalty to his friends. One of those friends is ... *the Outcast*."

Tiberius stiffened at the mention of his erstwhile son. Meanwhile, Lucius paused to take another sip of port before casually hitting yet another ball into a side pocket.

"What about the little bastard?"

"Young Harry has asked for my aid in helping his young friend in exchange for *certain favors*. And so, I did a bit of maths and realized that if the votes of those Houses allied with Wilkes and Malfoy were joined with those of Nott and Selwyn and also a few other Houses whose agreeance could be purchased or compelled, we would have enough votes to retroactively strike the Ultimate Sanction provision from the Inheritance Act, thus freeing Theo No-Name from the opprobrium of our society."

Nott's snarl was almost bestial. "I knew it! Don't play the fool with me, Malfoy! You want to save the Outcast from the Sanction because *he's your illegitimate son*!"

Lucius laughed and shook his head even as he sank another ball in a pocket. "I have often found your paranoia and

jealousy to be amusing, Tiberius. But in this instance, they are unjustified. Theo No-Name is not my son. I was never unfaithful to Narcissa during our marriage, and I do not believe Christina was unfaithful to you. Or perhaps she was, and Theo is someone else's bastard son. I certainly wouldn't blame her for seeking comfort in another man's bed when the alternative was yours."

An angry vein bulged on the side of Nott's head, and he felt acutely aware of how the Oath of Unity he'd sworn upon becoming a Lord was the only thing that kept him from pulling out his own wand to attack Lucius.

That and the fact that Lucius Malfoy knew *a lot* of dark magic.

"No, Tiberius," Malfoy continued. "I finally decided to aid Harry Black in this matter not for the sake of your son, but rather my own. You see, I realized that, as much as I might utterly despise Narcissa Black for the sins and cruelties she has visited upon me, I do not *quite* have it in me to see Draco subjected to magic that would cause him *to hate his own mother!*"

That last comment utterly baffled Tiberius Nott, to the point that Lucius sank two more balls before he spoke again.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"What it *means*, Tiberius, is this: Sometime this summer, Sirius Black will stand before the Wizengamot and take his Vow of Unity. And immediately thereafter, the Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of Black will invoke the Ultimate Sanction against his wayward cousin Narcissa! Or at least, he will if that silly law is still on the books by then."

Nott gasped and literally staggered back a step as Lucius continued.

"After all, there is abundant evidence that she was the one responsible for framing Lord Black and sentencing him to Azkaban for crimes he did not commit. Certainly more evidence than you had against your son when you invoked the Sanction against him."

"She did that to save us! To save *YOU*!"

Lucius laughed. "Really, Tiberius, I've no idea what you mean. After all, *I* was placed under the Imperius by Marcellus Frump, just as you were. Unless you want to challenge the DMLE's findings on the matter, of course."

Nott shook his head as if trying to clear his thoughts. "No ... he can't. Do you hear me? Sirius Black cannot be allowed to use the Ultimate Sanction on Cissy!"

Lucius's eyebrows rose at Nott's casual use of his ex-wife's nickname. He knew Tiberius Nott was besotted with the demoness, and he wondered if they'd actually had sex yet.

"*Probably not*," he thought. "*She's an awful creature, but her standards are still higher than this.*" He said none of that, however, though he continued to speak even as he sank another ball.

"Alas, Tiberius, I fear neither you nor I can do anything to stop Black from acting as he chooses against a House member who betrayed him so egregiously. But *Harry Black* can! The young Lord Wilkes has Sirius Black wrapped around his finger, and I've no doubt he can persuade Sirius to forego vengeance against *dear Cissy*. And together, the two Lords are rich enough to bury all the evidence about the mysterious and sultry '*Ariana McFlossy*' so that the

DMLE will close its investigation into whether Narcissa is a secret Death Eater and a murderess!"

Despite himself, Lucius snorted contemptuously at the thought of Narcissa's ridiculous pseudonym. He personally had three different fake identities set up in case it would ever be necessary to flee Britain, and *none* of them was a bloody *anagram*!

Malfoy leaned forward once more and easily sank the 9-ball, thus ending the game. Then, he turned to face the anguished Tiberius Nott and ended their other game just as casually.

"If you truly care for Narcissa Black—and you truly wish to earn her undying gratitude—contact her and the other Houses that were loyal to our Lord. I'm sure the Selwyns at least understand what value dear Cissy brings to our master's cause. And if not, I'm sure they understand what a disaster it might be if she were caught, prosecuted, and forced to testify under Veritaserum about her time as a Death Eater. She does know where an awful lot of bodies are buried, after all. Literally as well as figuratively."

Lucius laid his pool cue across the table and then downed the last of his drink before summoning his cloak and heading towards the Floo.

"You can send me an owl with your response," he said over his shoulder. "And also a Gringotts draft for the 900 galleons I just won from you."

Then, he turned back towards his host with a much colder expression. "And Tiberius? Don't ever try to cheat me again. Next time, I might take it personally."

Lucius tossed a handful of powder into the fire and departed. A few seconds later, Nott's glass shattered against the fireplace mantle.

## Chapter End Notes

Next: As Harry's third year finally draws to a close, he helps out a few friends and gains an important insight into Voldemort's true agenda. Meanwhile, the Potters try to adapt to their change in circumstances while threatening storm clouds gather on the horizon.

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P\*\*\*\*\*n page and supported my original fiction.

Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2 (What the Sinister Man is reading): "That Universe Over There" by mytimeconsuminghobby (AO3 only). A bit of a crack-fic, but a fun one. MOD Harry travels to another universe and finds a very young fem-Harry being put through the usual BS, so he adopts her and vastly changes the timeline. Manipulative!Dumbledore but still fun.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors: Andrensath, Anne-athema Codex, BlueWater, Darkarus, Deaalethiae, Feynmanners, heyob, Jennifer Weasley, Kami, Krisni, LFGB (Head Priest of Bob), Magica, Megha Teresa, Miss LeFay, Mr Yarrow Dread Ellen Ink, Marq, Ondas, Pivosh(Knight of Ron aka Reg), Pokeflute, PrettyPinkCupcake, Pyroscorchr, RamsesZwei, Rinrael, Sielk, and Tuesday. Thanks, guys!



AN4: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 14,711. Followers: 15,324. Favorites: 13,475. Communities: 224. Discord followers: Over 3200! Go Team POS!

AN5: The title of this chapter and the next is derived from a line from one of my favorite episodes of one of my favorite TV shows. I'll reveal what show along with the whole quote next chapter.

AN6: Some advance notice – the next chapter is the final chapter of Year 3. Book 4 will (barring the unexpected) begin on September 1, 2020 with advance previews coming before for my Discord followers.

# **The Future, All Around Us, Waiting To Be Born (pt 2)**

## Chapter Notes

SHAMELESS PLUG!

My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now available on Amazon under my pen name, T.S. Mann (get it?). It's free to Kindle Prime members and \$4.99 to people who want to download the Ebook. Paperback copies are available for \$12.99. Check it out, and if you like it, and if you use magic improperly, it can drive you insane and possibly destroy the world. No pressure or anything.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

***Harry Potter  
and the Death Eater Menace***

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***Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.***

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***Chapter 53: The Future All Around Us, Waiting to Be Born (Pt 2)***

***The Hogwarts Quidditch Pitch  
26 April 1994***

Oliver Wood sat alone on a bench and stared out at the empty pitch wondering how everything had fallen apart.

*"This should have been our year," he thought bitterly. "An experienced team with no replacements. Good Chasers. Good Beaters. And the best Seeker I've ever seen. And the Slytherins had four new members! All we had to do was stay 50 points ahead of them and then let Jim catch the Snitch, and the Quidditch Cup was ours. What happened?"*

But he knew what had happened. It had been a failure of *leadership*.

Fred and George had been at each other's throats for months and suddenly couldn't coordinate worth a damn, a problem Oliver had ignored because he didn't want his involvement in the prank against SPAM exposed.

Meanwhile, Jim, for all his unmistakable talent, was emotionally unstable and had been for two years, but since the Easter break, he'd been moody and distracted. When Oliver tried to impress on the boy to wait until they were up by 50 points, Jim had just looked at him blankly. To add insult to injury, the night before the match, his three Chasers (one Pureblood and two Halfbloods) got into an argument over Theo *Bloody* No-Name and were all still mad with each other about it.

And then, there were the Slytherins. Their three Chasers (Pucey, Black, and Montague) were as well-oiled as the year before, and Harry Black especially seemed to be as good a Chaser as his twin was a Seeker. Their Beaters (Goyle and Bulstrode) were still young and inexperienced but had grown into their roles over the season. Their Keeper (Bletchley) was adequate. But their *Seeker* ....

It had to be confessed that while Ginny Weasley was not as good as Jim Potter, she was still *very, very* good. So much so that Jim was hard-pressed to keep her from the Snitch while waiting to catch it himself until after the Lions had built up a lead. At one point, Jim was desperate enough to try a Wronski Feint, hoping she'd crash and have to sit out for a while. Instead, the Slytherin girl matched him perfectly.

After the game entered its *fourth hour*, the score was 270-230. Gryffindor had only managed a 40-point lead, and that was only because Oliver was simply better than Bletchley as Keeper. But finally, Angelina scored a penalty goal after Goyle fouled her. 280-230! When play resumed, Jim immediately started searching for the Snitch in earnest with Ginny right on his tail. He saw a flash of gold at the far side of the field, and for an instant he seemed entranced by it. Then, the Boy-Who-Lived rocketed towards his target. Ginny was closer. It took her a second to realize he'd spotted the Snitch, but she reacted instantly, and the two were soon neck-and-neck. As they drew ever nearer to their target, they bumped into each other a few times trying to throw the other off course.

And then, it happened. The Snitch veered left which gave Ginny a slight edge. Jim pushed his broom harder and, without fully intending to, hit the girl hard with his elbow. Ginny fell behind a few feet, and Jim reached out and grabbed the Snitch. From his vantage point across the field, Oliver screamed in jubilation. The crowd noise was deafening. So loud was it, in fact, that it was several seconds before Jim could hear Madam Hooch's whistle blowing. When the noise died down, the referee announced her call via Sonorous.

"THE GRYFFINDOR SEEKER HAS CAPTURED THE SNITCH. 150 POINTS TO GRYFFINDOR. BUT PRIOR TO THAT, HE COBBED THE OPPOSING SEEKER."

Cobbing was the official term for "excessive use of elbows," a foul move that entitled the Cobbed player to a penalty shot. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, a penalty called after the Snitch had been caught was a mere formality, and often, the affected team simply waived their right to take a shot. But not always. The victory in this match was Gryffindor's, but they still needed to beat Slytherin by a total of 200 points to claim the Quidditch Cup. If Ginny made the shot, the Lions would only have a 190-point lead, and the Cup would go to the Snakes.

As Oliver nervously took his position in front of the center goal, the two teams cleared the field save for Ginny Weasley ... and Harry Black, who'd come out presumably to give a pep talk and some advice. Though the two were about 100 yards away, Oliver could just make out Harry turning to look in his direction for a few seconds before leaning in to whisper something to Ginny. She took a step back and looked at him in visible shock. Then, *she* turned to look towards Oliver, and even from this distance, the Gryffindor could tell.

She was smiling.

Harry exited the field and a few seconds later, Ginny lifted off on her broom, the Quaffle tucked under her arm. Madam Hooch blew her whistle, and the Slytherin took off towards the Gryffindor goals. About a third of the way there, she veered right, indicating that her target was the goal on that side. Worried that it might be a feint, Oliver moved to a position above and between those two goals so that he was ready to defend each. When she was just over

halfway to the goal, Ginny pulled back her arm and threw the Quaffle towards the outer goal, and Oliver moved farther left to intercept it. Apparently, for all the girl's skill as a Seeker, she was obviously an inexperienced Chaser.

Or so Oliver thought.

Suddenly, Ginny accelerated even as she shifted her grip. The girl flew up behind the Quaffle in flight and she spun her whole body around in mid-air so that she could strike the Quaffle with the end of her broom as if it were a Beater's bat. A perfectly executed Finbrough Flick!

The Quaffle changed course and rocketed towards the goal on the *opposite* side. Desperately, Oliver moved to intercept, and for a moment, he thought the girl had misaimed and the Quaffle would fly wide. But then, the spinning Quaffle seemed to bend in its trajectory, arcing towards the outer edge of the goal. Oliver stretched and strained, and he could almost feel the Quaffle graze his fingertips. But it was not enough to block the ball from passing through the hoop.

Madam Hooch blew her whistle again, as the scoreboard clicked over. 280-240! Instantly, the crowd went wild. The Slytherins stormed the field in jubilation over their Quidditch Cup victory that had been secured by a Second-Year player who had just performed a maneuver never before seen on the Hogwarts Quidditch pitch. The three Chasers lifted Ginny onto their shoulders. Nearby, Goyle and Bulstrode hugged one another, and the girl impulsively kissed her fellow Beater right on the lips. A second later, they parted, their eyes wide in surprise. Blushing, they reached out and stiffly shook hands instead before turning and quickly walking away from each other.

Hours after the game's conclusion, Oliver still sat alone on his bench. He had shaken Pucey's hand with as much grace as he could summon and then left to shower and change clothes. But he didn't return to the castle with the others. He didn't want to have to look any of his teammates in the eye after letting them down. Right now, he simply wanted to be alone with his failure. Naturally, his solitude was interrupted.

"You alright?"

Nearby was a young man in a Slytherin uniform studying him with concern. And right now, Oliver *really* didn't want to talk to any Slytherins.

"I'm fine," he said, turning his attention back to the field. The Slytherin sat down beside him, to Oliver's annoyance.

"Look, I'd really like to be alone right now," the Gryffindor snapped. "And I'm definitely not in the mood for Slytherin gloating."

"I'm not here to gloat, Wood. And I know you're upset. But you're a really good Keeper. You can't let one rough day ruin your confidence."

"Obviously, I wasn't good enough. I couldn't block the most important shot of my life, not even when the shooter is a 12-year-old girl! So much for playing for Puddlemere United. They'd laugh me out of tryouts."

"What about the Montrose Magpies?"

"What about them?" Wood asked irritably.

"My family owns them," the boy said. "And they really need a good Reserve Keeper. I think you'd be a great fit. I would

be happy to talk to my father about it."

Oliver's head snapped around. "And why would you want to do something like that for me?"

Cassius Warrington smiled. "Because we have more in common than you might think, Wood. And us Purebloods have to stick together, right?"

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#### ***4 Privet Drive***

#### ***27 April 1994***

James looked around his newly furnished "living room" and reached up to wipe the sweat from his brow with more satisfaction than he'd anticipated at the start of the day. True, all the good furniture from Potter Manor had been given over to Harry, including antiques that had been in the Potter family for centuries. The spartan furniture that he'd brought to 4 Privet Drive was all Lily's and thus was exempt from seizure. In the months between her graduation from Hogwarts and their marriage, Lily had kept a small flat in London that she furnished using Muggle money her parents had gifted her. After the wedding, she kept the flat for use as a safehouse for the Order of the Phoenix. Then, after the war ended, the flat was let go, but she kept the furniture in storage mainly for sentimental purposes. After all, they had plenty of room, as the storage attic of Potter Manor was bigger than most people's homes. Naturally, when she had the house elves pack her meager furnishings away, Lily had never imagined that James would one day manage to lose literally everything else the couple had.

On the bright side, James was still a master Transfigurationist and was able to restore the old furniture to good-as-new and even update it to something more



stylish. A sofa, recliner, and coffee table for the living room, as well as an old television James was afraid to touch. A sturdy oak table and chairs for the kitchen, which, to James's surprise, came with a Muggle re-freezer-ator already installed (but still empty). Upstairs, there was one queen-sized bed for James and Lily and a twin bed for Jim, along with a dresser for each. He hoped Jim could adapt to sleeping in such a small bed after using in a king-size since the day he came out of the nursery.

The terms of James's agreement with Artemus Podmore afforded him few dignities, and for a while, James was afraid he'd leave the bank in literal rags. But in the end, he was allowed to keep some personal items judged to be of nominal value at auction: clothing with no resale value, the oldest broom in his collection, his owl Godric, scrapbooks and other minor personal effects. Jim and Lily could keep all their own personal items, and James was relieved to learn that Jim could keep his Nimbus 2000 for Quidditch. Naturally, James would also keep the wand he'd taken from the Potter family vaults to replace the one Pettigrew had snapped. His new wand was a 10-inch ebony with a unicorn hair core. It had been owned by James's great-great-grandfather, Benjamin Potter. Surprised to find a compatible wand made of such materials, he'd consulted with Mr. Ollivander, who told him that such a wand would be excellent for transfiguration but would likely only choose a wizard after its first if he were "a descendant who had something to prove ... or something to atone for."

With the furniture in place, James sat down and debated whether to risk turning on the television, something he had not attempted since the Marauders' infamous 1976 "Month of Muggledom." That adventure ended abruptly after James tried to adjust the volume on the quartet's tiny rabbit-eared TV and, in the process, somehow started a house fire. Of

course, another part of James's reticence about the television might have had something to do with its location – right next to the small padlocked door that James assumed was *The Boot Cupboard*.

Suddenly, James was startled by the doorbell. Wondering who on earth could have come for a visit, he shifted his wand to a back pocket and then opened the door. It was old Mrs. Figg, the squib for whom James had purchased a house on Wisteria Walk just a block away so that she could keep an eye on Harry as he grew up. She stood on the front porch bearing a platter of cookies. She also smelled heavily of cat, but, at the moment, James was hungry enough not to care, so he invited her in.

"Goodness me, Lord Potter," she said excitedly. "So the rumors are true? You'll be living here at 4 Privet Drive?"

"For the foreseeable future, Mrs. Figg. Come in. And please – call me James. Can I get you something? All I have is water, I'm afraid, and even that's only out of the end of a wand."

"Oh, that's quite alright dearie. I just wanted to pop by and see if I could get you anything or perhaps fill you in on the neighborhood gossip. I'm sure you'll soon be flooded with nosy neighbors who'll be atwitter at a handsome young man living alone here."

James frowned at the thought of "nosy neighbors" and resolved to put up some Muggle-Repelling Charms once it got dark. He showed the squib to the sofa and sat down in the recliner. As he munched on a cookie, he listened to the woman give him a brief yet tedious rundown on the neighborhood personalities. While James didn't particularly care about who argued too loudly about money or who was

cheating on his spouse with a neighbor, there were a few questions he did want answered, and he felt he'd need to ease into it.

"I was wondering, Mrs. Figg. Do you know what happened to Petunia Dursley and her son? I was surprised to learn that they'd moved some time ago."

"Well, let me see now. Yes! Vernon Dursley passed away back in the Autumn of '92. October, I think it was. Next thing I knew, Petunia was packed up and ready to leave before Christmas! She bought a townhouse in Oxford to be nearer to Smeltings. I reckon she was out of here before the ink on the cheque had dried. Of course, I understand how she wouldn't want to stay here, you know, *in the house where it happened!*"

James nodded as he tried to absorb. "Okay, let's take that in reverse order. '*In the house where what happened*'?"

"Why Vernon dying, of course! She woke up in the middle of the night to find him gasping for air and clutching his chest! But by the time the ambulance came, it was too late. Heart attack! I hear he'd turned *purple* in the face. Of course, not to speak ill of the dead, but when a man doesn't take care of himself, it's bound to catch up with you sooner or later!"

"Uh-huh. And, um, who is this ... Smeltings person?"

"Smeltings is a school, dearie. Smeltings Academy. It's a rather posh public boarding school in the Southeast. Young Dudley started there the same year your little Harry started at Hogwarts."

"Right. That makes sense. And you said something about a cheque?"

Mrs. Figg clucked her tongue. "The *insurance* cheque! Apparently, Vernon Dursley left a *very large* life insurance policy plus a widow's pension through that drill company or whatever it was that paid enough for Petunia to live comfortably in Oxford."

"Oh, well. That's ... nice," said James who had no idea how life insurance worked. "And the house has stayed empty since then? It looks to be in very good shape for a house that's been vacant for a year and a half."

"Oh it hasn't been vacant, dearie," she replied. "After Petunia and Dudley moved away, the house was rented out two or three times. But the renters always moved out unexpectedly and on very short notice. Rather odd, I thought."

"Huh," said James, who didn't know enough about the real estate market to have a clue why that would be odd. There was a moment of silence between the two as he took another bite from his cookie. Finally, he decided to dive right in.

"Mrs. Figg... what do you remember about ... about Harry?"

The squib sighed fondly. "I thought he was a dear lad. And ever so kind. Remarkably kind considering how he got treated by the Dursleys. Of course the rest of the neighborhood wasn't much better towards him. I think Vernon and Petunia must have told everyone that he was a bad egg, and so no one trusted him or would let their children play with him. I know when he went off to Hogwarts, they told all the neighbors he was in a reform school. The St. Brutus School for Incurably Criminal Boys or something like that."

James's eyes practically bugged out of his head, but Mrs. Figg continued without any notice.

"Then again, I reckon I can't say too much. The Dursleys used to let me babysit him whenever they were going out and didn't want to take him along. But I didn't dare treat him too well, or he might have let the Dursleys know that he liked visiting me, and then they probably wouldn't have let him come over at all. Better just a little kindness than none at all, I thought."

James stared at the woman aghast. Did she really believe that it was dangerous for her to treat his son kindly or else it might cause the Dursleys to treat him worse?

"Mrs. Figg," he began before faltering for a few seconds. "Do you mean to say that ... you *knew* the Dursleys were mistreating Harry?!"

"Well, I knew there was a lot of shouting going on. And I always thought he looked a bit underfed...."

"WHY DIDN'T YOU CALL ME?!" he shrieked, startling the older woman.

"Call you, Lord Potter?" she asked almost indignantly. "I assure you! I kept a close eye on wee Harry, and I never saw any signs that he had magic! I'd have let you know at once if I had!"

"Never mind if he had *magic*, woman! Why didn't you call us to let us know he was being *abused*?!"

She stared at James in genuine confusion.

"Because it never occurred to me that you'd have cared!" the old woman exclaimed. "You told me he was a squib and I

never saw reason to doubt that. And while the Dursleys may have treated him poorly, I never had cause to think his life was in danger. The Dursleys fed him, clothed him, kept him in school, and gave him a place to sleep at nights. I'd say that's better than most squibs from Great Houses could ever hope for!"

The woman leaned back as she regarded James Potter, and something dark and cold entered her eyes.

"After all," said Arabella Figg née Greengrass, *"I do have some personal experience on that score!"*

James stared in horror at the woman he'd entrusted to look after his son.

"Thank you for coming by, Mrs. Figg," he said weakly. "If you'll excuse me though, I have a lot unpacking to do."

The squib nodded understandingly and made her way out. Once she was gone, James leaned his head against the door for several seconds. Then, he steeled himself and marshaled his Gryffindor courage before marching back to the padlocked cupboard door. With a single slash of his wand, the padlock clicked open and fell to the floor. James knelt and opened the door. Inside were mostly cardboard boxes which he pulled out. It was all of Harry's things from when he was a child. Old worn clothes. Broken toys. A stuffed black dog that Sirius had given his godson as a baby, though a leg had been ripped off and most of the stuffing was gone.

James crawled into the cupboard itself. The lightbulb was shot, so he summoned a Lumos. There was a small lumpy mattress on the floor and a few dusty shelves that held a few children's books and the remains of toy soldiers. Hanging on the wall opposite was a musty piece of paper

with crayon markings faded with age. Gently, James pulled the paper down so he could see it clearly.

At the top were two words in a jagged child's scrawl: *Harry's Room*. And below them were two stick figures: one with wild black hair and glasses, the other obviously a woman with red hair. Next to the two figures was a crudely drawn black dog. And below that, the words "*I love you!*"

The paper shook in James's hand, and a single tear drop landed on it. And then, James slowly lowered himself down onto the floor and lay there on the mat his son had once slept on with the child's drawing clutched to his heart.

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### ***The Great Hall at Hogwarts*** ***1 May 1994***

As the students of Hogwarts sat down for breakfast, there was a strange commotion that seemed to sweep over the Great Hall. Not a violent commotion, but rather an odd and widely felt feeling of disconnection, as if a sizeable percentage of the student body suddenly realized they'd forgotten something important and couldn't even remember what it was. At the Slytherin table, Harry Black noticed the reactions of his fellow Slytherins and smiled. Then, very deliberately, he rose, picked up his cup and plate ... and moved down to the end of the table where Theo No-Name had been sitting by himself. Several Slytherins watched in confusion as the newly-installed lord of an Ancient and Noble House lowered himself to sit with the hated Outcast, although once they'd thought about the matter, many of those Slytherins could no longer recall *why* the Outcast had been hated in the first place.

The confusion was answered when the morning owl post arrived bearing the latest edition of *The Daily Prophet*.

## **WIZENGAMOT STRIKES ULTIMATE SANCTION LAW!**

*At the close of yesterday's session, in an unexpected and unscheduled move, the Wizengamot voted by a margin of 198-65 to amend the Inheritance Act in order to strike those provisions relating to so-called Ultimate Sanction, with the change to take effect at Midnight last night. The controversial provision had previously allowed any Head of an Ancient and/or Noble House to expel any family member deemed guilty of treasonous acts or other high crimes. The magic inherent in the law ensured that the expelled individual would become an object of hatred in the eyes of all right-thinking wizards and witches. It was most recently used by the Lord of the Ancient & Noble House of Nott against his youngest son, who confessed to unspecified crimes against his family before being cast out under the Sanction.*

*"After much soul searching and contemplation," said Lord Nott, "I now realize that I was too hasty in using the Sanction. While Theo No-Name's crimes against my house were worthy of expulsion, in my rage over his contemptible sins, I used a legal procedure that was meant for the worst examples of treason. I see now that the Ultimate Sanction, as written, is open to abuse by Lords and Ladies driven by righteous anger over betrayal by family members but whose conduct nevertheless does not rise to the level of universal condemnation. Accordingly, I support the striking of the Sanctomen Ultimo. Perhaps, in the future, the Wizengamot might revisit this issue and reestablish an Ultimate Sanction with safeguards to prevent misuse."*



*Lady Acacia Brown, Matriarch of the Noble House of Brown, strongly disagreed. "The Santomen Ultimo is part of our nation's heritage and was passed into law in response to one of the darkest eras in our history. Who are we to show leniency to those who our forefathers would have condemned to the harshest punishments?! And in a motion rammed through with such limited debate time, as well! This is indeed a bitter pill to swallow coming so soon after the murder of my grandson, Tristan, at the hands of exactly the sort of swine who are deserving of such national hatred! And yet, it is certainly unsurprising, considering which families pushed through this rash amendment!"*

*Lady Brown refers to the fact that many of the Ancient and/or Noble families who supported revocation of the Sanction were associated with the Death Eater insurrection which ended in 1981 (although all of the accused Death Eaters presently seated in the Wizengamot were found to be victims of the Imperius Curse) or are otherwise generally considered "dark" families. Of note is the support of the newly reactivated House Wilkes for the amendment. The new Lord Wilkes, Harry Black (who is also the Heir Presumptive of the Ancient and Noble House of Black), made waves at the March 28 Special Session by claiming the Wilkes Seat mere moments after his dramatic self-expulsion from House Potter, for which he was previously the Heir Apparent. The controversy only deepened yesterday when Lord Wilkes's Seneschal announced that House Potter had sworn fealty to House Wilkes, thereby giving Lord Wilkes control over the majority of his former family's votes, including the Order of Merlin votes held by both the Boy-Who-Lived and his father, the disgraced former Chief Auror James Potter.*

Neville read the article three times as he sought to absorb the information about Theo.

"What's up, Longbottom?" Cormac McLaggen asked. "You look like you've taken ill."

Wordlessly, the boy handed over the newspaper.

"Huh," McLaggen said casually. "So the No-Name kid's not an Outcast anymore. Good for him." Then, the older boy returned to his breakfast without further interest.

"Good ... for ... him?" Neville asked weakly. "That's all you have to say?"

"Neville's right!" exclaimed Lavender Brown angrily from a few feet away.

"... I am?" Neville asked in surprise.

"Of course! It's like my Nan said in that article! Theo No-Name clearly did something to justify having the Ultimate Sanction put on him, but then a bunch of Death Eater scum got together and revoked it. That's definitely suspicious in my book!"

"Harry's family voted with the majority!" Neville exclaimed. "So did Justin's family! So did my Gran!"

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, Longbottom," Cormac drawled. "I'm sure your Gran had good intentions. And anyway, the bill passed, and Magic ratified it. So whatever bad stuff No-Name did in the past, it's all water under the bridge. No need for anyone on either side to bear a grudge over it."

"Hmmf!" Lavender said, indicating that she at least still held a grudge.

Neville stared at McLaggen and Lavender. Then, he looked around the room at other prominent members of the CPS. The reactions were mixed, but a sizeable percentage simply appeared to shrug and move on as if the sudden absence of a magical hatred for Theo was no stranger than its onset had been the previous summer. And *then*, he looked over at Theo himself and noticed that several other members of Slytherin House had moved down to his end of the table, apparently to congratulate him. Or, Neville supposed, to reassure him that they didn't hate him quite so much. Either way, he suspected they were mostly doing it as a way of currying favor with Harry, as the Lord of House Wilkes had rather blatantly taken the ex-Outcast under his protective wing.

Neville rose stiffly from his seat. "I'm not hungry," he mumbled. "Feel kind of sick." Then, he turned and quickly left the Great Hall.

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Meanwhile, Theo and Harry were enjoying the experience of classmates who, terribly confused over their own feelings, came to greet the former Outcast. Some apologized. Others (bizarrely, in Harry's view) simply said "*No hard feelings?*" or the equivalent. A few stayed where they were, and Harry intuited that their hostility towards Theo remained to some degree, though Harry couldn't tell whether they were more severely affected by the Sanction or simply had independent reasons for their anger. After all, whether he was an Outcast or not, Theo was now unquestionably back to being one of Harry's closest friends. And *a lot* of Slytherins had reason to hate Harry and anyone in his orbit.

"May I join you?" asked a familiar voice. It was Blaise Zabini, whose mask of casual ambivalence was, for once,

not very convincing. Indeed, the boy almost looked as though he was genuinely afraid of being rejected.

Theo glanced at Harry who nodded slightly. "Of course," said the ex-Outcast. "It's good to see you again."

Blaise relaxed and smiled. "Likewise."

The Silver Trio picked up seemingly where they'd left off the previous year, back before the Sanction had required them to maintain a "stealth friendship." The level of emotion on Blaise's face – specifically genuine relief and happiness that the Sanction was over – confused Harry and made him wonder what Zabini's angle was. After all, it had been Blaise who had unilaterally broken off their own friendship a few weeks earlier rather than reveal what he knew about the Potter Prophecy and the Deathly Hallows. Zabini had not set foot in the Prince's Lair since.

Then, Harry suddenly realized the truth: After three years at Hogwarts, Blaise Zabini didn't actually have many true friends and virtually none in Slytherin House. Obviously, cutting himself off from Theo and later Harry must have been more difficult than it had seemed. With a flash of insight, Harry also realized how much *he* had missed Blaise for the last few weeks.

The trio's gabbing was interrupted when someone nearby coughed to gain their attention. They all turned and were rather surprised to see Cedric Diggory standing nearby bearing a sheepish expression. Cho Chang stood next to him looking as though she wished to be anywhere else in the world.

"I hope I'm not intruding, but I wanted to take a moment to congratulate you, Theo, on being free of the Sanction. Now that it's over, I was hoping that you might be willing to

come to our next Cultural Preservation Society meeting to discuss your experiences."

Theo stared at the Hufflepuff somewhat gobsmacked. "... Seriously?"

"Oh yes!" Diggory said with complete earnestness. "There's been a lot of tension among the Hogwarts student body, and I know that a few of us have treated you poorly. But I hope that we can all come together and perhaps find common ground. I mean, I'm sure it took a lot longer than you might have liked, but in the end, the system worked."

By that point, all of Theo's friends looked aghast if not actually angry, though Theo himself seemed almost amused by Diggory's attitude.

"Diggory," said Harry. "Slightly off-topic, but did you know I'm apparently allergic to pufferfish eyes?"

Cedric blinked in confusion. "Uh, no, I didn't know that, Pot- ... I mean, Black."

"Yeah, normally it's not an issue, but the reaction is pretty intense if the pufferfish is cooked. So, if somebody uses pufferfish eyes in a potion and then bakes the potion into a cake, the effects can be very serious. Enough to put me in the Hospital Wing."

"Well *luckily*, that didn't happen," snapped Cho Chang. "Look, we've already done our detentions for that prank and no one even got hurt. Are you still holding a grudge over it?"

Harry's eyes narrowed, but before he could say anything, Theo interrupted. "Thank you for your invitation, Diggory. I'll definitely consider it. But for the time being, I want to

observe how everyone else reacts to me now that the Sanction is over before I talk about it in front of any crowds."

"Fair enough," the other boy said. "Do let me know if you change your mind. Good day to you all."

As the two returned to the other side of the room, Harry could clearly here Cho Chang mutter to her boyfriend, "*I told you that was a dumb idea!*"

Once they were far enough away, Theo and Harry broke out into helpless snickering.

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After breakfast, the Slytherins headed out for their morning Herbology lesson, but on the way there, Neville stepped out of a boy's restroom looking very pale. When he saw Theo and Harry, he took a deep breath and called out to them timidly.

"Um, Theo? Harry? Can I speak to you two in private for a sec?"

The two Slytherins looked at one another, shrugged, and followed the Gryffindor into the bathroom.

Once inside, Neville turned to the two boys and opened his mouth to speak only for his voice to crack. He paused, fought back a sob, and rubbed his hands over his face before trying again.

"I ... am so sorry. To you Theo, and to you as well, Harry. You were right about what you said. I don't know how, but you were right. The Sanction is gone and so is all that *stupid pointless hate* I've been feeling all these months. All I feel now is ... *absolute shame*. Shame at how I let down my

friends and how I failed to live up to my family's ideals. I can only hope ...."

He paused, briefly overcome. Then, he wiped his eyes before continuing. "I can only hope that someday, I can earn your forgiveness. But even if it takes me the rest of my life, I will never give up on it. No matter what it takes, I will never ...."

"SWEET MERLIN, HARRY! MAKE HIM STOP!" Theo suddenly shrieked as if in physical pain. "THIS IS EXCRUCIATING!"

Harry smirked. "I quite agree. Neville, do you remember what I said to you *just after* that comment about how one day Theo would be free of the Sanction?"

Neville swallowed. "You said that ... that I would feel humiliated. And *I do*! Believe me, I ...!"

"Bzzzz!" Harry said while waving his hand in Neville's direction as if to ward off a buzzing insect. "And what *else* did I say after that?"

The Gryffindor hesitated and licked his lips. "That ... Theo would forgive me? And that you would too?"

"Yep! Without hesitation!"

"Okay," Theo said. "I'm glad we've got that sorted. Now can we please get on to Herbology before we're late for class?"

"Guys! I'm serious!" Neville exclaimed. "I was horrible to you both. You can't just ... *forgive me* like it was nothing!"

Theo and Harry glanced at each other. Then, Theo sighed in exasperation.

"Okay, fine!" Then, he pulled his book bag off his shoulder and shoved it into Neville's arms. "As penance, you have to carry my books to all the classes we have together for the rest of term."

Harry smiled approvingly before adding his own book bag on top of Theo's. "Mine too. I mean, it's been *awful* having to tiptoe around your feelings this year so the Sanction didn't make you turn against me. Not to mention having to listen to all those *dreadful* accusations you made about how evil the Outcast was. It was *heart-rending*!"

Neville struggled under the weight of the two heavy bookbags plus his own that was still hanging from his shoulder. "Um ... guys!"

"Now then," Theo said. "To Herbology!"

"But of course!" replied Harry. The two Slytherins turned towards the restroom door.

"Guys!" Neville called out. "Wait up! These are kinda heavy!"

"Pfft!" snorted Theo. "Not nearly as heavy as the *crushing weight* of the Ultimate Sanction!"

"Or the *awful burden* of having to run interference between my friends all this time!"

"*GUYS!*" Neville wailed plaintively as he struggled towards the door before it could close behind his two laughing friends.

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***The Prince's Lair***  
***Later that afternoon***



Harry stood at the end of the table, alone in the Lair save for the Hydra Throne. His eyes were focused on Rajah, the central serpent, the Exemplar of Ambition.

"On the night that you confirmed me as Prince, Rajah, you told me that you were doing so even though you did not believe I had articulated an ambition worthy of the Throne."

The boy lifted his chin defiantly. "I believe I have an ambition now that will satisfy you."

Intrigued, Rajah tilted its head slightly. "Please share it, Prince Harry."

"Since entering the wizarding world, I have encountered *multiple* forms of mind control and memory-altering magic. My friends have been subjected to some. People I admire have been subjected to some. *I* have been made the victim of some. As I said recently to someone else, it *offends* me that wizards and witches can so casually manipulate the minds of other people. And so, I have decided to dedicate myself – well, when I'm not trying to *avert the apocalyptic prophecy* that you've stuck me with – to removing the threat of such mind-altering powers."

Rajah shook his head gently. "Your fears and concerns about such baleful magic are warranted. And we understand your desire to protect yourself from them. But developing a more powerful defense against mind alteration is not the sort of world-shaping ambition we wish to see."

"You misunderstand, Great Rajah," the boy said confidently. "I don't mean that I will increase my own mental powers so that I can resist such magic better. I mean that I plan to *abolish* mind control. To rip it out of the very soil of magic by the root no matter what form it takes!"

If it were possible for a snake's face to show surprise, all the Hydra's nine faces were now doing so.

"You would wipe an entire field of magic from existence?" Rajah said.

Harry held up that morning's newspaper with its headline:  
***WIZENGAMOT STRIKES ULTIMATE SANCTION LAW!***

"I've already begun," said the Prince of Slytherin.

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## ***12 Grimmauld Place***

### ***17 May 1994***

On the night of May 17th, Grimmauld Place held its last Black family meal for the foreseeable future. Two weeks earlier, Buck MacMillan had taken an International Portkey provided by the British Aurors back to Australia where he would "talk to some old friends." Three days ago, he sent word via Patronus that everything was good to go. The old friends in question – specifically, people in the Tabula Rasa Relocation Office who owed Buck some pretty big favors – had agreed to "rehabilitate" Bellatrix Black by providing her with a new (and younger) face and a new identity to go with it. The trick was getting her to Australia since International Portkeys were rather heavily regulated in Britain.

Happily, other countries were more open-minded about such things, especially when price was no object and the purchaser "knew people." The next morning, a disguised Bellatrix and Regulus posing as a newlywed couple on their honeymoon would board the Occidental Express, the magical train that connected Britain with the rest of Europe. They would disembark in Venice two days later, where a "friend of a friend of a friend" named Gunther

Hagrid would be waiting at the train station with two International Portkeys to Sydney. Buck would be waiting for them at the arrival point.

And so, tonight's dinner was a going-away party for Bellatrix and Regulus, although the latter continually reassured his brother that he would be back in a few weeks once Bellatrix had been settled in.

"I'll be back as soon as possible, Brother," Reg had said. "Definitely by the time Harry gets back from Hogwarts. We do have plans for the summer after all."

Regulus had already explained to Sirius that Harry appeared to have both the capacity for Metamorphmagery and the desire to develop it. Reg only hoped that he'd be as good an instructor to the boy as his Aunt Cassiopeia had been to him, though he was glad that Nymphadora Tonks would be on hand to provide an alternative perspective on the shapeshifting art.

Regulus did not bother to tell Sirius what *other* plans he and Lucius Malfoy had for the new Lord Wilkes during the summer break.

And speaking of Nymphadora Tonks, the evening meal was also a celebration for her, as the young woman's reinstatement to the Auror academy had just been finalized. Fortunately, James Potter had entered the paperwork prior to his fall from grace, but even if he'd failed to do so, the Auror Corps was facing a manpower shortage, and several of the more promising trainees, Tonks among them, were being fast-tracked.

Meanwhile, Sirius had rewarded Andromeda and Ted by giving them a "delayed dowry" in the form of a new home in Hogsmeade that would soon become renovated into a new

Tonks Clinic. Regrettably, he could not officially reinstate Andromeda as a Black because of the circumstances of her expulsion, but he could and did name Nymphadora as "a daughter of House Black" which entitled her to the same considerations he'd given Harry. That is, she would thereafter always have the option of changing her surname to Black and claiming sanctuary with the Black family. And, of course, even if he couldn't officially reinstate Andromeda, nothing stopped him from presenting her and her husband with a great big pot of money.

In other "Sirius matters," after weeks of begging and profuse apologies, Harry finally forgave his godfather and invited him to stay at Potter Manor for the summer. Partly, this was for pragmatic reasons. While Harry might be emancipated, Amy Wilkes and Theo No-Name were not, and if Harry wanted them to stay with him over the summer months, there would need to be an actual adult on the premises. Neville would also be spending some time at Potter Manor, and Augusta would be accompanying them as well, but Harry did not wish to impose on Lady Augusta by asking her to spend the entire summer as a guest in someone else's home. But Sirius had always considered Potter Manor more of a home than Grimmauld Place anyway, and he happily reassured Harry that, while he was doing better but still in convalescence, he was definitely "adult enough" to chaperone minors for a few months.

Regulus snorted loudly upon hearing that but said nothing.

All of that meant that in a few days, Grimmauld Place would be locked down again. Thus far, Sirius had ducked public questions of where he'd been staying all this time, and he and Regulus agreed that it was best for them to keep the old townhouse in reserve as an emergency bolt hole. Besides, even after Dobby's renovations, the house still held

plenty of bad memories for them both, including a mad portrait in the attic whose wailing could still be heard echoing through the place late at night. Besides, once Sirius was well enough to take his Vow of Unity, he would be able to reclaim Chenenoir, the ancient fortress-manor of House Black.

With everything else going on, perhaps the Black Brothers might be forgiven for *completely forgetting* about Kreacher.

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### ***Ancient Runes***

#### ***27 May 1994***

As the other students circled around him, Blaise Zabini did his best to project an air of supreme confidence. Usually this was not a problem for the boy, but these were unusual circumstances. He was floating on an experimental homemade broomstick indoors in front of the entire Ancient Runes class, and he was about to get hit from several different angles by blasts of cold water. Supreme confidence was difficult to maintain while in danger of both public embarrassment and personal discomfort.

"**AGUAMENTI!**" cried out six voices in unison, and jets of water shot out from six different wands towards the boy. And yet, he stayed dry. There was a soft humming sound from all around him accompanied by a faint glow, but not a drop of water touched him.

"Alright, that's enough," said Harry Black as he vanished the pool of water that had landed on the floor. "We thank you all for your assistance."

The six students took their seats, and Blaise brought his broom down to the floor while Harry continued their presentation.

"As you can see, the incorporation of the modified Protego Orbis into the rune matrix of the broom functioned exactly as designed. While the shield is active, the broom and its rider are surrounded by a low-intensity shield that protects from all angles. While not sufficient to block any serious attacks, it is sufficient to render both broom and rider completely waterproof. Unfortunately, this basic design requires that the shield be powered by the same Sowilo rune that powers the broom's flight capability, and so the broom can fly neither as fast nor as high as it could without the shield's incorporation. We believe, however, that further modifications to the rune scheme can overcome that problem. While it will be some time before this shield can be incorporated into the design of competition level brooms appropriate for racing or Quidditch, it can easily be added to the design of most ordinary brooms used for everyday travel in order to protect the rider from inclement weather such as rain and snow."

Harry looked around the room.

"Are there any questions?" he asked.

Sue Li raised her hand with a speculative expression. "How much damage can the shield handle? Could it defend against curses?"

The two boys looked at one another. "Not with this design," Blaise said. "Protego Orbis is a specialized ablative shield that degrades quickly from direct hits from any genuinely dangerous spell, although the speed and maneuverability of the broom itself should help with dodging attacks like that."

Hermione raised her hand next. "What are the pressure limitations?"

Harry blinked. "Sorry, I'm not sure I understand the question."

"Well, your Protego Orbis protects from water coming from many angles. Could it protect from a force coming from all angles simultaneously without collapsing? I guess what I'm trying to ask is, could you take this broom underwater as a submersible?"

Harry's eyes widened, and he smiled at the question. Once again, he regretted that Hermione had not been on his team, even if it had been Fate that insisted otherwise.

"That's a very interesting question. Whether or not it's possible to use this to make a functioning magical submarine of some kind, I couldn't say. My instinct is that it's not possible with a standard rune scheme for a broom. But I would have to defer to Professor Babbling to be sure."

With that, he turned to the witch in question with a genuinely curious expression on his face, and Babbling smiled back indulgently.

"It is indeed an interesting question. As we discussed on the very first day of class, the basic scheme for a flying broom calls for Eiwaz, Raido, Ehwa, and Sowilo to symbolize wood, journey, horse, and power. In principle, those runes could allow for travel through water instead of air, though the invocation of '*horse*' for something meant to go very deep underwater might pose problems of symbology. Then again, horses are associated with water in some cultures. The ancient Greeks believed that the first horse was created by Poseidon."

She turned to address Harry and Blaise. "I would certainly recommend you continue researching the possible

applications of this ingenious rune scheme, Mr. Black and Mr. Zabini. Congratulations! A well-earned O!"

The two elated boys shook hands warmly. Other than the Goldstein Group, they were the only team project so far to earn an Outstanding for their practical end-of-term project.

Which, of course, made it even more imperative that Harry bring Anthony, Sue, and Hermione into his summer plans.

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***Hogwarts***  
***5 June 1994***  
***4:30 p.m.***

"So ... you've heard then?" Percy asked quietly. He was on his way to a meeting with his siblings about which he was already anxious when a visibly furious Penelope Clearwater crossed his path.

"About the Crouch assistantship, Percy?" she said in a tight voice. "Yes, I've heard. Congratulations. Although I'm wondering why I had to hear it from the Head Boy instead of you. Understandably, he's not happy about it either."

"Penny, I'm sorry!" the Gryffindor said plaintively. "I was going to tell you later tonight. Anyway, I'm sure there was a good reason. And not just because ...."

"We both know what the reason is, even if you don't want to admit it. I'm Head Girl. Bobby is Head Boy. Our grades are as good as yours. And yet Crouch hired you for a prestigious job that we all three applied for without even waiting for our NEWTs scores to come back. So what do you think the reason was?"



"Penny, you know me. I have *never* sought to use blood status to get ahead."

"Oh come on, Percy. You never *needed* to. Everyone knows the Weasleys are in the Sacred 28 even if you're the only family on the list that has the decency to be embarrassed about it! Still, you'd have thought Crouch would at least go through the formality of given Bobby and me *an interview*! But no! The way I heard it, the only real competition you had was from Selena Harper, whose grades aren't as good as any of ours but whose family tree is missing a few branches!"

"Penelope!" Percy snapped. "That is a horrible thing to say about Selena. Look, I'm sorry you didn't get the job, and I'm equally sorry that you think my Pureblood lineage gave me an unfair advantage. But I can't help the fact of who my ancestors married. Nor can I help the fact that the bigotry in our society may have given me an unfair advantage I never asked for."

"Well look on the bright side," she said while removing a charm bracelet from her wrist and handing it over to a shocked Percy. "At least now, I have *no reason* not to leave this backwards country as soon as I get my NEWTs results. And *you* won't have to worry about the stigma of a Halfblood girlfriend undermining your job prospects!"

With that, Penelope walked away, ignoring Percy as he called after her. After a few seconds, Percy paused to rub his eyes and put the charm bracelet in his pocket. Then, he continued to his meeting, hoping it would go better than the one he'd just left.

A few moments later, a somber Percy stepped into an empty classroom to find Ron, Ginny, and the Twins already waiting

for him. Unsurprisingly, the Twins were on opposite sides of the room. Once inside, Percy cast both a NEWT level locking spell and a Silencing Charm on the door.

"What's this all about, Percy?" asked George. "You said you have a message for us from Dad, but you wanted to tell us all together."

He glared at Fred. "Although I don't see why you needed us all in one place."

Percy took a deep breath and nodded towards Ron and Ginny, who moved to stand on either side of him.

"Well, I do have an announcement. Two related announcements, actually. First, Dad has gotten tickets for all of us in the Ministry booth for the Quidditch World Cup. We'll be portkeying onto the grounds with the Diggorys for the Finals!"

"Blimey!" Fred exclaimed. "That's awesome!" George looked equally as excited ... until Percy dropped the second announcement.

"Well, I say that we will be going. However, I've discussed the matter with Dad. He and Mum are still *very cross* with you two over that nonsense on your birthday, and he has instructed me to tell you both that unless you get over your ridiculous feud, *neither of you* will be attending the World Cup!"

"What?!" George exclaimed.

"But that's not fair!" Fred added.

"You should have thought of that before you *ruined* the birthday party that our mother had slaved to prepare for

you!" Percy said somewhat pompously.

"Hey! He started that fight!" George said while pointing an accusing finger at his twin.

"Rubbish! You started it with that mouth of yours! I was just the one to turn it into a food fight!" Fred sneered angrily.

"But don't worry! I'll be finishing it too. Our OWLs results will be in before the Cup. And I *aced* my Potions OWL. So once I've won our little bet, that will be the end of it."

George fumed at that, but Ron spoke up before he could say anything.

"Do you really think that will be the end of it, Fred? Either you'll win, and George will have to give up being a prefect *and* drop Ancient Runes, and he'll resent you for it forever. *Or* George'll win, and you'll be a sore loser about it!"

"A sore loser! Moi!" Fred sputtered angrily.

"Oh come on!" George snapped. "It's all you can do not to be a sore *winner*, you git! Besides, I ought to call this bet off anyway! I finally found out yesterday that you're only doing so well in Potions because Hermione helped you out with inside information, you cheater!"

Fred bowed up dangerously. "You take that back! I never cheated. All she gave me was references to some potions research that Snape did when he was younger! I still did all the reading and all the work, while you spent all your time Percying around in Ancient Bloody Runes!"

"*I really wish people would stop using my name as an insult*," Percy muttered. But it was Ginny who spoke aloud.

"STOP IT! BOTH OF YOU!" she yelled, her voice cracking. "I *hate* that you're acting like this! Bill and Charlie have both moved away and we never see them anymore. A-a-and soon, Percy will */sniff/* will probably be moving out when he gets his Ministry job! But */sniff/* I always thought you two would still be there for your turn as my big brothers!"

By this point, Ginny paused to wipe away a tear, and her voice hitched.

"You know, I wasn't actually planning on moving...." Percy began before Ron elbowed him in the side while Ginny continued.

"You two were always the ones I could count on," the Slytherin girl sobbed. "Gred and Forge, who always brought joy and laughter to everyone around them! */sniff/* But now look at you! You've let jealousy and pettiness tear you apart! I ... I can't *bear it!*"

With that, the distraught girl whirled around and buried her face in Percy's surprised chest as she began to cry loudly. Percy looked down at her head in confusion, while Ron stepped over to pat her on the shoulder while fixing the Twins with an angry glare.

"Now look what you've done!" he snapped.

Both Fred and George looked shaken and abashed at the sight of their little sister crying her eyes out over their actions.

"Look ... Ginny," Fred began. "I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. But look at it from my point of view. George and I spent *years* talking about our plans for the future. And then, he just tosses them all aside the moment someone sends him a bloody Prefect's badge in the mail! The way I

see it, maybe he needs to be taken down a peg for his own good!"

"What the hell are you *talking about*?! I didn't toss anything aside when I became a Prefect!"

"Oh no?" Fred said, his temper rising again. "Don't pretend you still want to open a joke shop! I saw you talking to Bill about becoming a curse-breaker!"

"No, idiot! You saw Bill talking to me about me becoming a curse-breaker and me backing away slowly! No way am I spending the rest of my life raiding tombs and dodging dark curses or any of that nonsense! I still have every intention of opening a joke shop! Now whether it's one I open *alongside* you or one I open down the street from you as a competitor is kind of up in the air now, but I've never changed my plans!"

"Oh pull the other one, George! Who ever heard of a Hogwarts prefect opening a joke shop?!"

George snorted. "Well, the only other wizarding joke shop in Britain is Zonko's, and I don't know if he was ever a prefect or not, but a sample of one is hardly a trend."

"Hang on," added Ron, "didn't you guys figure out that the Marauders included Professor Lupin and James Potter? Aren't they your prankster idols or whatever? Well, one of those was a prefect and the other was Head Boy! That should count for something, shouldn't it?"

Fred started to say something insulting to Ron, but then, he caught sight of Ginny looking back at him with a tear-stained face, and he faltered. After a few seconds, he turned back to George, now a bit calmer.

"And you think all this prefect guff and faffing about with Ancient Runes is going to help when we open up our store? It's not just to lord over me?"

"I don't know if being a prefect will help," George replied. "Although I suspect it might make it easier to, I dunno, get a loan or something if the professors here will write letters of recommendation for me instead of warning everyone I'm a menace to society. But I'm glad to be taking Ancient Runes, because my own rune working has already gotten much better. If nothing else, I'm pretty sure I'll have the Extendable Ears ready by the end of the summer!"

"... *Extendable Ear*?" Ron whispered.

"*Best not to ask*," Percy answered softly.

"And I never wanted to *lord anything* over you or anybody else," George added. "But yeah, I do kinda like it that people recognize that I've got a brain to go with this charm and these good looks. And I'm just disappointed you don't feel the same, to be honest."

"Pfft!" Fred snorted. "I don't care whether anyone recognizes my obvious genius or not, least of all a teacher!"

"Oh come on, Fred!" Percy exclaimed. "You were awarded points by Professor Snape. *Professor Snape*. Gave points. For a potion you made! I've been here seven years, and I've never heard of Snape giving any Gryffindor points for anything we do in class!"

"Well," Ron added. "There was that time he gave points to Hermione for calling Jim a braying ass!"

"Be that as it may!" Percy continued, annoyed at the interruption. "Honestly, Fred. After all this work you put in

to, as you put it, *ace* your Potions OWL, do you really mean to say that even if you score an O, you won't continue on to NEWTs potions? Has it not occurred to you that NEWT level Potions is where you'll, oh I don't know, learn to make candies that can turn people into canaries *safely* instead of sending them to the Hospital Ward?"

Fred absorbed that with a sullen expression before turning back to George. "You still want to go into business together?"

George crossed his arms. "If you're willing to treat it like a real business instead of a lark, and also to treat me as an equal partner, then yes!"

Fred nodded. "And you really think it will help us to be more ... Percyesque here at Hogwarts?"

"Believe it or not, I do," George answered, even as Percy rolled his eyes.

"*And now, I'm an adjective,*" he muttered.

Fred nodded. "Okay, then. You don't have to give up being a prefect or drop any classes if I win the bet." Then, he smiled wolfishly. "Instead, if I win, you have to wear a shirt to the World Cup Final that says '*My other twin is smarter and better looking.*'"

George glared at Fred for a moment ... before bursting into laughter. He stepped forward to shake Fred's hand. "It's a deal ... you prat!"

Fred laughed as well before pulling his twin into a hug. Then, as one, the Twins came over to thank Percy and Ron for their little "intervention" and to apologize to Ginny for

upsetting her and making her cry. As she wiped her tears away, she smiled.

"It's okay. I'm just happy we're a family again. Group hug?"

And on that note, all five Weasleys came together for one massive family embrace.

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Not long afterwards, as the Weasleys were leaving to head back to their respective dorms, Ron pulled Ginny aside.

"By the way," he said in a whisper. "Just between us, that was some really nice work. Some of your best, I reckon."

"I don't know what you mean," Ginny said innocently. Ron, obviously, was not fooled.

"Come on, Gin! I'm only one year older than you. I've had a *lot* of time to figure out that you know how to cry on cue! Mum does the same thing."

Ginny sighed. "I know, I know. Honestly, it feels kind of cheap. Like as a Slytherin, I should be able to manipulate people more gracefully. But I was feeling a bit desperate."

"Hey, I'm not complaining! It worked after all!" Then, Ron gave her a conspiratorial smile. "But just so you know, I'm pretty sure it won't work on me."

"Thanks for the tip!" she said with a predatory smile. "I'll remember that and start working on alternative strategies for when I need you to do something for me."

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***The Great Hall***  
***19 June 1994***



At the Leaving Feast, the Headmaster proudly awarded the House Cup to Slytherin to thunderous cheers from the Snakes and polite applause from everyone else. Harry personally won a lot of respect from his housemates for the points he'd earned, most notably the late award of 100 points from Dumbledore himself for "Creative Use of DADA Training and Applied Creature Handling." That was how the Headmaster chose to describe Harry's actions back at the end of March since "singlehandedly capturing Peter Pettigrew and then curing Remus Lupin's lycanthropy" provided more detail than either of them wanted revealed. But even sweeter than that, Harry noted that Slytherin might have still lost to Ravenclaw had it not been for the points the Eagles had lost due to Cho Chang's role in the attempted prank against SPAM.

In any case, Harry's Third Year was in the books, and he was glad to see the end of it. When the grades and rankings were posted, Hermione was once more at the top of the class rankings, but it was unbelievably close between her, Harry, Padma Patil, and Anthony Goldstein, all of whom were separated by less than a single point. Jim finished a very respectable seventh thanks to a much-improved Potions grade and (rather surprisingly) a high O in Divination. Even Ron did better, clawing his way into the top fifteen. But to Harry's chagrin, Jim claimed the top score in DADA for the first time.

After Scrimgeour's death, Remus Lupin took over as DADA instructor, and he performed ably, but his final exam had been brutal. It was an obstacle course which Harry easily navigated until the last area where he had to vanquish a Boggart. Thankfully, Remus had been advised to make sure only he was present to observe everyone's darkest fears. Jim's fear was still a Dementor, but it was an unusually small specimen that for some reason reminded Remus of

Harry Black wearing a Dementor's cloak. Nevertheless, Jim conquered it fairly quickly, and neither of them commented on the Boggart-Dementor's odd appearance.

Unfortunately, Hermione had a rougher go of it. Her Boggart manifested as Harry after he'd been Kissed by a Dementor. She cast the Boggart Banishing Charm flawlessly, only for the Boggart to transform into Jim after *he'd* been kissed by a Dementor. Followed by Blaise Zabini's bullet-ridden body. From there, every banishing attempt only led it to transform into someone else who'd died in her original timeline until, distraught, she finally gave up.

Harry had similar difficulties. On the bright side, he seemed to have gotten over his fears pertaining to Vernon Dursley and/or doxies, but only because other traumas had taken precedence. And while he could cast the Riddikulus, he was not quite fast enough to prevent the Boggart from simply switching to a different fear instead of fleeing. First, it was Rufus Scrimgeour lying dead. Then, it was Marcus Flint lying dead (which Remus found a bit odd). When Harry cast the Riddikulus a third time, it turned into Remus Lupin ... *in his werewolf form*.

At that point, Harry gave up and withdrew. He did so for two reasons. First, he was afraid the manifestation, if allowed to continue, would show not the werewolf attacking him but rather it being torn apart by Harry's magic, and he was unwilling to let the real Remus witness that image. And second, he was afraid that the Boggart would next turn into Regulus Black replaying his death scene with Sirius from the aborted timeline, and that would raise *all kinds* of questions with Professor Lupin. Nevertheless, it annoyed Harry to admit defeat no matter what the real reason.

Remus himself was apologetic, as he mistakenly believed that the events from the Shrieking Shack must have given Harry a mild version of wolf-fear that caused him to fail the challenge. To make up for it, Remus pulled Harry aside after the Leaving Feast to present him with a going away present.

"My plan is to be back in Britain by September," Lupin said. "But, well, one never knows what the future brings, so I wanted to give you this now. Consider it a summer class project."

He handed over at least a dozen pages of notes bound together with twine.

"It's all the information needed to recreate the Marauder's Map. It might take you a while, but based on your classwork, I'm sure it's within your capabilities, especially if Miss Granger helps."

Harry accepted the gift warmly and wished Lupin the best on his trip to Shamballa. Then, he added "*make a new Map*" to his long list of summer projects.

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Later that night, Harry also took part in an unusual Slytherin tradition, albeit one modified for the occasion. Every year after the Leaving Feast, the Seventh Year Slytherin prefects informed their successors of the legend of the Prince of Slytherin. This year, however, there actually was a Prince in residence, and so things went a bit differently. At around 10:00 p.m., Adrian Pucey was led into the Prince's Lair by Titus Mitchell and Selena Harper, where Harry was waiting for them while seated on the Hydra Throne. Also present were Theo, Ginny, Amy, and Blaise (who had returned to the Lair at Harry's invitation

for this gathering). The prefects then explained to Pucey that Harry was the Prince of Slytherin, that it was a big secret he would never be able to reveal to outsiders, and that it basically meant that Harry ruled Slytherin House from behind the scenes.

Or at least, he planned to.

Pucey accepted the announcement with a surprising equanimity, and Harry noted as much.

Pucey shrugged. "You're the Secret Master of Slytherin House? Honestly, it's not *that* big of a surprise. Two questions, though."

"Oh?"

"Yes. First, why isn't Caroline here?"

Caroline Avery was the rising Seventh Year Prefect for the Slytherin girls, and Harry confessed that he didn't know her well enough to trust her at this point. The Averys, after all, were notorious supporters of Voldemort, and while Caroline herself wasn't from the main family line, she was a CPS member. Harry chose to exclude her from this meeting, and he would assess her trustworthiness in September.

"And your other question?" Harry asked.

"Is this Prince business going to interfere with Quidditch?" Pucey asked in utter seriousness.

"Hell no," said Ginny sharply.

Everyone laughed.

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### ***The next day ...***

The ride home on the Hogwarts Express was uneventful, though Harry detected an undercurrent of tension he found unsettling for reasons he couldn't quite describe. With Theo's Ultimate Sanction undone, the supernatural effect that led indirectly to the creation of both SPAM and the CPS had ceased to exist, and Harry had assumed that the CPS at least would wither away. SPAM was another matter, as Harry had plans for that organization unrelated to simply serving as Theo's support group.

But to his surprise, while there was no overt hostility between the factions, the division between the two groups was still on display. Nearly everyone who'd been an active member of SPAM (with the addition of Neville, Amy, and Ginny) chose to sit together in the two Express cars at the end of the train. Even Harry and Jim claimed compartments near to one another even though they avoided direct contact. And nearly everyone who'd been active in the CPS claimed cars near the front of the train. Those students not involved in the feud took the cars in between, and, unusually for the Hogwarts Express, there was little travel between the different "zones" during the six-hour journey to London.

At Kings Cross Station, Harry disembarked and made his final goodbyes to his closest friends, even though he had plans to see most of them again soon. At the far end of the platform, he could see Jim hugging James Potter who had arrived in Muggle attire. Harry turned away before either of them saw him. Soon after, Harry, Theo, and Amy took the Knight Bus to the Leaky Cauldron and then Flooed to what was still known as Potter Manor, at least for the time being. Harry was still deciding whether to change the name for the duration of his eighteen-year lease of the property. The

trio stepped into the manor's massive Great Hall. Artemus Podmore was waiting, along with Dobby and the four Potter elves (all of whom still seemed baffled and perhaps worried over the change in ownership).

Elmo was the Chief Elf, a position that roughly corresponded with "butler" in a well-staffed Muggle residence. Immediately, Harry noticed tension between Elmo and Dobby, but set it aside to worry about later. The other three elves were Reebo (the amiable groundskeeper), Zooty (the fussy maid), and Buttercup (the acerbic no-nonsense chef). As Artie introduced the elves, Harry could not help but be distracted by the surroundings, as the walls of the massive Great Hall had been stripped completely bare of the dozens of magical portraits that had hung here previously. When asked, Dobby explained that all the Potter portraits had been put into storage in the attic, along with everything that bore the Potter coat of arms or simply the Potter name. Harry accepted this, although Elmo looked slightly offended by the redecoration.

Harry directed the Potter elves to return to their duties. Once they were gone, Artie reached into his briefcase and pulled out a shimmering bit of cloth – the Potter Invisibility Cloak. Per the final lease agreement between Harry and James, Harry would have possession of Potter Manor for eighteen years and legal ownership of the Invisibility Cloak for four.

In fact, Harry was perfectly capable of Disillusionment by now and felt he had little need for an invisibility cloak no matter what its pedigree. He'd only accepted the Cloak that had caused his brother more problems than it had solved, rather than claiming the manor for a longer term, as a precautionary measure. Specifically, Harry was aware of Blaise Zabini's odd interest in the Deathly Hallows and Theo

No-Name's suspicion that the Potter Cloak was one of them. Until he knew what the Zabinis really wanted with him, Harry decided it was best to make sure the item was under his control.

Not that such possession was without risk. As Artie had explained, the lease agreement meant that at the end of four years, Harry would have to turn the Cloak back over to the Potters. Given the value assigned to it by Gringotts, if Harry lost it (as Jim had done *twice* so far), the financial penalty would be ruinous. Thus, Artie recommended that the Cloak stay in Harry's personal Gringotts vault unless it was needed. Harry agreed for the summer at least, but he announced that he might be taking the Cloak to Hogwarts with him when school resumed. He did reassure the solicitor that, if so, it would be behind impenetrable security, and while Artie found that unlikely, Harry thought that the Prince's Lair might well be *better* security than a Gringotts vault.

Harry signed the paperwork the solicitor presented confirming that Harry had taken possession of the Cloak and the Manor, and Artie departed to place the Cloak in the boy's vault. Then, Dobby gave the children a tour of the manor. While Harry had seen it all before, Dobby seemed eager to show off the kitchen and dining areas. The main dining room held an enormous table able to hold over twenty people, but most meals for the Potters were held in a breakfast nook attached to "the small kitchen."

"The *small* kitchen?" Harry asked in surprise. "We have more than one?"

"Oh yes, Master Harry," Dobby exclaimed excitedly. "Master Harry was not shown the *large* kitchen during prior visits because it is seldom in use. Historically, it was only required

for large catered events, but with the passing of Lord Charlus Potter, few such affairs took place here. Indeed, in recent years, the manor has only hosted two formal events per year: The New Year's Eve Ball and the birthday fete for Master Harry's former brother. Consequently, the large kitchen was sealed away."

Dobby smiled indulgently as he led the children down a corridor Harry had never explored before in his prior visits.

"However, Dobby has explained Master Harry's ... *eccentricities* to Buttercup, and while she was appropriately scandalized at first, Dobby has persuaded her that her duties now include both assistance and instruction regarding Master Harry's ... private entertainments."

"Instruction?" Harry asked. "And what sort of ... *private entertainments* are we talking about?"

The boy's voice trailed off as Dobby opened a set of double doors to lead them into the large kitchen. And it was a *very large* kitchen, twice the size of the one in Longbottom Manor and easily big enough to contain the Dursley's kitchen four times over. There were three ovens, two sets of burners, and four huge, industrial-sized ice boxes. Immediately, Harry's eyes were drawn to a nearby wall which had bookshelves that stretched up to the ceiling full of nothing but cookbooks. He walked over to them in a daze and read the covers.

*Magical Cooking the French Way. A Wizard's Guide to Patisserie. 1001 Indian Curries You Can Make with a Wand. The Art of Portuguese Desserts. A Beginner's Guide to Viking Cuisine.* And many, many more.

Harry turned towards Theo and Amy who seemed baffled by his reaction. He grinned in delight.



"I'm home."

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#### ***4 Privet Drive, Surrey***

With a loud crack, James and Jim Potter Apparated into the backyard of 4 Privet Drive. Jim looked around almost suspiciously. The yard was very overgrown and enclosed by a large privacy fence. The two-story Muggle home loomed over them almost menacingly.

"So ... this is it?" Jim said slowly.

"Yep!" James said with forced cheerfulness as he unlocked the back door. "We have to Apparate into the backyard because we can't let the Muggles see us do it in the front. Way too many questions."

"Uh-huh."

Jim followed his father into the kitchen, his trunk following behind with a flick of James's wand. The only furniture was a simple table with four chairs. Through the doorway, Jim could see a mostly empty living room. Calling the place *spartan* was an insult to Sparta. *The Burrow* was much better furnished than this.

Jim sighed dejectedly and tried to put on a brave face. He'd fully accepted that virtually all the Potter wealth would have to be sacrificed to save his father from Azkaban or death. He'd written Harry a letter begging him to save James, whatever it took. And Harry had done it. He'd overcome the Oath of Enmity and saved James at the cost of beggaring House Potter. Jim had no regrets about paying such a price for his father's sake. Nevertheless, it was only now that Jim began to truly appreciate the fact that he was now poor.

Jim Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived and the Heir Apparent to the Ancient and Noble House of Potter ... was *poor*.

"Do, uh, we have anything to eat?" he asked. James winced.

"Sorry, no. I, um, well ... to be honest, I was kind of intimidated about going to a grocery store until your mother could go with me. I've been Apparating to the Leaky Cauldron for take-out most days."

"How can you afford it?" Jim asked before he could catch himself. He had not meant the question to come out so bluntly.

"Hogwarts pays into a separate account for Lily, and she, uh, authorized me to access it for household expenses. Just until I can get another job, of course."

Jim nodded. "So ... when will Mum be here ... I mean, be home."

"She said around 7:00. Why don't you go upstairs and unpack? Your room is the one at the end of the hall."

"Okay," the boy said before hesitating. "Is that where Harry slept?"

James coughed suddenly at the question and hoped desperately that Jim didn't notice as he instinctively cut his eyes towards the cupboard for just a second.

"No, no. His was ... the one to the left of the stairs on the opposite end from yours. I think your room was a guest bedroom. It's bigger and it's got a better view than Harry's old room, so ... there's ... that...."

He trailed off lamely. Jim nodded and did not ask any questions about why the guest room was bigger and better than Harry's room. He just turned, picked up his trunk, and headed up the stairs. Inside his room, he found a small dresser, a single bed, and a desk and chair in front of a window.

Jim wrinkled his nose. The room stank of potpourri. He dropped his trunk and went to open the window. The "view," such as it was, showed nothing but the back garden and the tops of the houses on the other side of the privacy fence. After a moment, he left his new room and went to see where Harry had slept. It was indeed smaller despite being completely empty, with only a cramped little window and a single hanging bulb for a light. Jim felt depressed just looking at it. He returned to his own room, laid down on the lumpy twin bed, and closed his eyes without even bothering to unpack his things.

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A few hours later, there was a *whoosh* from what had once been the Dursleys' dining room that heralded the arrival of Lily Potter. The largest fireplace was in the living room, but that one had been blocked off and replaced with an electric fire. Since the Potters had no formal dining room furniture, that room had been set aside as "the room where all the magical stuff was kept." The plan was for Lily to set up a rune scheme over the whole room so that any ambient magic in it wouldn't interfere with the Muggle technology in the rest of the house.

Lily stepped through and surveyed the room. With an idle flick of her wand, two trunks followed her through, one of which she directed to the far corner. It contained all her potions equipment (as well as all her books from her former

"Boudoir," still shrunken and locked away). James came down the stairs to greet her.

"Welcome to the House of Potter," he said with another forced smile before pulling her in for a hug and a kiss.

"Where's Jim?" she asked.

"Upstairs in his room. He seemed a bit down. I thought we'd go out to eat later."

"Of course," she replied. "But tomorrow, you and I are going grocery shopping followed by an elementary introduction to Muggle cooking. We can't afford to eat out three meals a day."

He nodded but then suddenly looked pensive.

"What?" she asked suspiciously.

"It's nothing major but ... I put all our stuff in the master bedroom. It's the biggest and it's got its own en suite. But ...." James swallowed. "Do you know how Vernon died?"

Lily tensed. "What do you mean? It was a heart attack."

"Well, yeah. But did you know he was in bed with Petunia when it happened? And was awake for part of it? Are you okay with sleeping in the same room where he ... you know?"

She stared for a moment before answering. "It's fine with me if it's okay with you. I'm not going to let it bother me."

James nodded, and they passed from "the Magic Room" into the hallway. She immediately stopped when she saw the door to the cupboard.

"Is ... is that it?" she asked.

"Yeah. I haven't told Jim anything about that. Do you think we should?"

"No," Lily answered quickly. "Not now, at least. Is ... is there anything in there? ... Of his?"

James shook his head. "Not anymore. I cleaned it out and put everything in the closet in our room in case you wanted to look through it. But ...."

"What?"

He looked stricken. "There was a drawing in there. Of *us*. He must have been just a little kid when he put it up there. It says 'Harry's Room,' and there are pictures of you, me ... and Sirius. He must have somehow remembered us for years after ... after we left him here."

Lily put her hand on James's cheek. "I know it's going to be rough. But we can't just wallow in the shame of our mistakes. We have to move forward now. Do what we can for Jim. And hope that once the Oath of Enmity is over, we can work to earn Harry's forgiveness."

He nodded. "So ... dinner?"

"Definitely. Go upstairs and get Jim. I need to get the rest of my things."

"Sure, Lily-Flower." He kissed her cheek before heading upstairs. Lily watched him go and then turned to regard the cupboard door with a cold expression.

"No regrets," she said harshly as she recalled the last time she'd been in this house. "None at all."

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The Potters Flooed back from the Leaky Cauldron around 8:30 p.m. Both Lily and James noted that Jim seemed somewhat withdrawn, but he resisted any subtle inquiries about his mood and neither of them was ready to push the matter. Once back at 4 Privet Drive, Lily patiently explained to her two boys how to safely turn on the television set, and father and son sat and watched mesmerized as giant wingless dragons rampaged through a Muggle amusement park. This, in turn, led to lengthy explanations from Lily about dinosaurs, cloning, special effects, and Muggle fiction in general.

"Why don't wizards have ... movies?" Jim asked.

"That's a very complicated question, but the short answer is that no one ever figured out how to use magic to record pictures and sounds in a format that could later replay them for other people."

"You two should work on that," Jim said as if it were the easiest thing in the world. "I bet whoever figured it out first would make a fortune!"

Sadly, no brilliant plans to revolutionize wizarding entertainment were made that night, although quite a few plans for the Potters' summer were laid out.

Much, much later, all the Potters were in bed asleep and dreaming. Jim dreamt of flying on shadowy wings on a quest for glittering objects. The dream always ended with images of dead loved ones followed by a living nightmare rising from a cauldron.

James dreamt of standing in the Great Hall of Potter Manor to answer to the angry portraits of his ancestors for his sins

and disastrous mistakes. The dream always ended with him suddenly embarrassed to realize he was naked.

Lily dreamt of sitting in this very bedroom, calmly and clinically explaining to Petunia the nature of the murderous revenge she was about to take against Vernon Dursley. The dream always ended with the terrible nagging suspicion that in her fury, she had forgotten something important.

Lily shuddered in the bed she shared with James and rolled over to wrap the covers tighter around herself as if she were suddenly cold despite the warm June night. Neither she nor James opened their eyes to see the pale figure who stood at the foot of their bed watching them sleep.

*"No regrets,"* whispered the ghost of Vernon Dursley. *"None at all."*

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## ***21 June 1994***

### ***Somewhere in Eastern Europe***

Since their explosive escape from the Ministry of Magic, Pettigrew and Rookwood had maintained a surprisingly low profile. Their illegal International Portkey had delivered them to an old Death Eater safe house on the coast of the Adriatic. Rookwood spent several weeks assessing and repairing the damage done to his psychic architecture by his recent experiences. He felt confident that his mental powers would soon be restored to their peak. He also felt certain that if he ever met a chap named Tiny Tim, he would torture the filthy Muggle to insanity and beyond. While Rookwood was in meditation, Pettigrew was in the nearby woods in his rat form, making new friends among the rat community and searching for those special "truly clever"

rats that were fit to join his little family. Socrates, Templeton, and Dock needed company, after all.

Finally, on the morning of the summer solstice, the two Death Eaters felt the call through their Dark Marks. It was time. Pettigrew entered the secret room hidden behind his picture of the Marauders and returned with his precious cargo. Then, he took the picture itself off the wall and packed it with their other meager possessions before Apparating to the coordinates sent to them through the Mark.

They found themselves on the grounds of what had once been an impressive estate in the hinterlands of Magical Albania but had since fallen into ruin. As the two men drew closer to the front door, however, they passed through the glamours responsible for that apparent decay, and the ruins were revealed to be an actual castle as impressive as the dwelling of any Ancient and Noble family back in Britain. As they approached the front door, it opened, and a young woman stepped out to greet them.

"Mr. Norvegicus. Mr. Nemo. I bid you welcome. Enter freely and of your own will."

Pettigrew rolled his eyes at the invitation, but Rookwood merely looked at the woman quizzically.

"Forgive me, young lady, but you have me at a disadvantage."

"Allow me," drawled Pettigrew. "This is Cassilda Selwyn, Seneschal to the Ancient and Noble House of Selwyn and grand-daughter of Lord Selwyn himself. I assume she is here as his representative."



"Indeed," Cassilda said tartly. "As you can imagine, Grandfather doesn't get out much nowadays. And for purposes of this gathering, you may address me as *Miss Vespertine*. Come."

She led the two men into the manse where a man in butler's livery was on hand to take their coats. It took Pettigrew a second to realize that the butler was, in fact, quite dead, and yet still able to provide impeccable (if utterly silent) service. Despite himself, Peter shuddered at the reminder of what specialties House Selwyn brought to their alliance.

Cassilda led the two men further into the house. In the grand foyer, there stood a large tank filed with a translucent green liquid. Inside was a large writhing *something* that raised the hackles on the back of Peter's neck. For all his power, Peter Pettigrew would always be a rat inside, and he knew that this was something that hunted his kind.

The surface of the tank gurgled slightly, and the *something* bumped up against the side. It was difficult to see, but Peter thought it was some kind of snake. He also thought it had two heads.

"What breed of snake is this?" he asked cautiously.

"*Breeds*, Pettigrew," she said silkily. "Seven different breeds of snake which are presently being fused into one perfect serpent. A familiar worthy of our Lord, don't you think?"

Peter nodded silently while Rookwood stepped closer to inspect the tank. "Your family's work, Miss Vespertine?"

"House Selwyn provided the raw materials, but the formula was developed by the Dark Lord. Even in his current ...

*condition*, he was able to advise us as to the potion's composition and on what snakes to use. My Auntie Camilla prepared the potion."

She laughed. "Auntie was delighted to learn something new about the rather obscure field of biothaumaturgy, and she looks forward to incorporating our Lord's wisdom into her own experiments. With the Dark Lord's permission, of course. And speaking of our Lord, this way, gentlemen."

Cassilda led the men further into the manor house. Eventually, she came to a set of sliding oak doors which she thrust open. On the other side was a large parlor where a small but unusual group awaited. On a sofa sat Narcissa Black (Miss Direction) who gave Peter a meaningful look that made his pulse quicken. She reached down to accept a glass of wine from a particularly decrepit house elf. Next to Narcissa sat Tiberius Nott (Mr. Nimrod), who was trying unsuccessfully to hide the utter terror he felt at being here. Across the room, Barty Crouch Jr. (Mr. January) leaned casually against the wall near the fireplace. He had a single gold galleon in his hand which he was absent-mindedly rolling between his fingers. His face bore its typical cold mask that perfectly concealed the raging emotions underneath.

Finally, sitting in a rocking chair in the middle of the room, Peter saw Yetta Garshi, whose "adoption papers" he had handled back when he was a respectable solicitor instead of a wanted terrorist. The Albanian witch stared vacantly with her mouth hanging open slightly, and she gently rocked back and forth in her chair, oblivious to everything including the tiny bundle of joy in her arms. Peter sniffed the air, and his Animagus senses could detect the merest hint of decay. It was the only sign that Yetta Garshi was already quite dead and what sat before him like a

blasphemous Madonna was just an exceptionally well-crafted Inferius.

*"Missster Norvegicusss."*

The voice was faint, high-pitched and almost-but-not-quite a gurgle, exactly what one would expect from a newborn babe who had somehow come out of the womb already able to speak. Despite himself, Peter shuddered, though at least he didn't outright whimper like Nott did. Steeling himself, Peter stepped forward respectfully and reached into his coat to produce a wand of yew and phoenix feather that he'd been guarding all these years. He bowed and held it butt first towards the bundle and tried not to react as a pale tiny hand reached out to clutch it tightly with that strange grasping instinct all babies have. The wand twisted slowly until it was pointing straight up.

**"LUMOSSS,"** hissed the thing in the bundle. Instantly, a savage light sprang from the wand's tip. Reflexively, Peter looked down at the floor until the light faded. Another softer hiss emerged from the bundle, and in response, the corpse of Yetta Garshi shifted in her chair. She carefully reached up to pull the swaddling clothes away and expose the infant's head.

It was a ghastly thing, pale and hairless. But other than that, it looked much as any newborn babe might look ... save for its *terrible* eyes. They glowed red like hellfire, and peering into them made Peter's head hurt. And yet, despite the pain, he couldn't bring himself to look away.

*"You have ssserved me well, Mr. Norvegicusss. But are you willing to make the sssacrificesss necessssary to become ... my greatessst ssservant?"*

Despite himself, Peter glanced down at his wand hand and instinctively flexed his fingers. Then, he fortified himself and returned his master's gaze without fear.

"I am, my Lord. I will serve you with all my heart and soul. And when the time comes, whatever you ask of me will be freely given."

"*Ki-ki-ki*," the monstrous infant laughed softly in the manner of snakes. "*Good. My true Death Eatersss ssstand with me. Our circle is forged anew.*"

The others moved to join Pettigrew so that their master could view them all.

"*At lassst*," said Lord Voldemort, "*we are ready to begin.*"

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***TO BE CONTINUED IN***  
***HARRY BLACK AND THE RESURRECTION GAME***  
***BEGINNING SEPTEMBER 1, 2020***

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## Chapter End Notes

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P\*\*\*\*\*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2 (What the Sinister Man is reading): Nothing new at the moment.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors: Anne-athema Codex, Bob, Deaalethiae, DorianGray, EssayOfThoughts | Aich, Fionan, kami, Megha Teresa, Pivosh(Knight of Ron aka Reg), pizdets UTC+10, PrettyPinkCupcake, ProgKingHughesker, Rudy1991, TNT, TrendyTreky, and Tuesday, Thanks, guys!

AN4: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 14,819. Followers: 15,409. Favorites: 13,569. Communities: 224. Discord followers: Over 3200! Go Team POS!

AN5: In the POS-verse, Muggles can come back as ghosts if there was sufficient ambient magic present at the moment of death. I honestly don't know why JKR decided that only wizards and witches could leave ghosts, thereby basically eliminating the possibility of telling a ghost story within the Harry Potter universe.

AN6: Last chapter, I said that the title was taken from a pivotal episode of one of my favorite TV shows. I can now reveal that the title of the last two chapters was taken from G'Kar's monologue at the end of the Season 3 Babylon 5 episode "Z'ha'dum." The complete and highly appropriate last lines are as follows:

"The future is all around us, waiting in moments of transition, to be born in moments of revelation. No one knows the shape of that future, or where it will take us. We know only that it is always born in pain."

AN7: There is a group read-thru of the first 3 books of POS that will start as soon as this chapter is published. I hope some of you who have not yet joined Discord will consider it. Previews of Year 4 will start up for Discord followers on or around August 8. For everyone else, I'll see you in September. Until then, wear a mask!

## End Notes

AN 1: The first several chapters will deal only peripherally with Harry, but they will establish aspects of the Wizarding World through the eyes of his friends which will definitely affect him later. That said, I actually had to significantly rework my outline for DEM because it was looking less like a Harry Potter story and more like a "Marauders reminisce about the old days for six chapters" story. I have come up with a framing device that will hopefully allow Harry to experience and possibly even interact with those memories of yesteryear. We'll see how it goes.

AN 2: Also, against my better judgment, DEM will include time travel shenanigans. It won't be the same kind of time travel shenanigans we saw in Prisoner of Azkaban, but it will be there and I'm nervous as hell about it. Wish me luck.

If you find yourself enjoying this story - and why wouldn't you - you can join other likeminded people on The Prince of Slytherin [Discord Server](#) There are perks to joining, such as a place I often frequent, and early access to the latest upcoming chapters.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!